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FIGHTING ADMIRAL FISHER
scuppers the "Fossil" Navy

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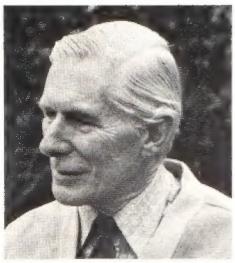

DAVID HOWARTH, whose first books were based on his wartime experience as a naval officer in the Shetlands, turned to full-time writing after the war. He specialized first in wartime episodes – *The Sledge Patrol, Dawn of D-Day* – and then in history. His accounts of Waterloo (*A Near Run Thing*) and Trafalgar (*Trafalgar: The Nelson Touch*) have received high praise. He is now working on a seafaring history of the British.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: (*t*=top; *b*=bottom; *l*=left). Cover: National Maritime Museum, Greenwich Hospital Collection. Inside back cover: by courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum. Collection of H. Beresford-Bourke 1814; Imperial War Museum 1794/5, 1796–9, 1801, 1817–19; *Judy* 1793; National Maritime Museum, London 1794*tl*; Press Association 1816; *Punch* 1800, 1815; Radio Times Hulton Picture Library 1794*b*. PHOTOGRAPHERS: Roynon Raikes 1793, 1794*t*; Eileen Tweedy cover, 1814, inside back cover. TECHNICAL ILLUSTRATIONS: John W. Wood & Associates 1803–13.

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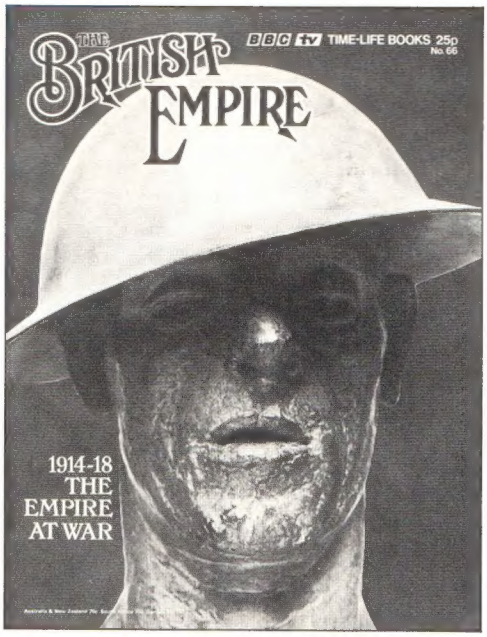
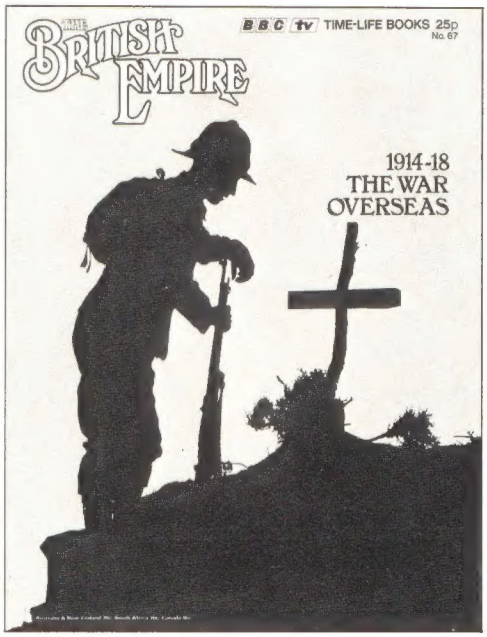
Published by Time-Life International (Nederland) B.V. in co-operation with the British Broadcasting Corporation.

Distributed in the U.K. by Time-Life International Ltd. and BBC Publications.

Printed in England by Jarrold and Sons Ltd. Norwich.





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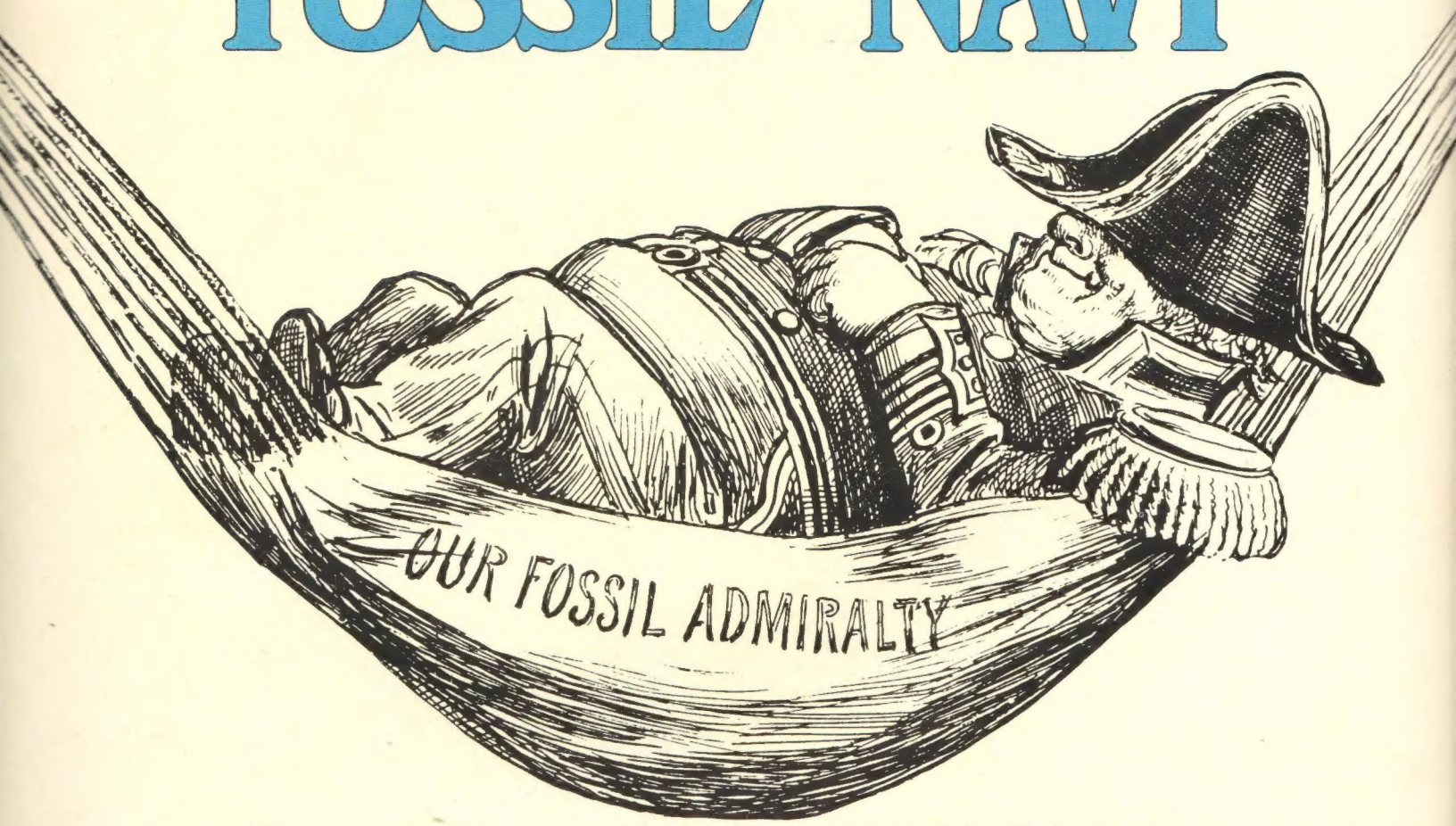
Cover: This portrait of Admiral Fisher, painted in 1902 when he was Second Sea Lord, deftly catches the quizzical belligerence, that set the Naval Establishment by the heels.

SCUPPERING BRITAIN'S "FOSSIL" NAVY



"Scrap the lot!" That was the order Admiral Sir John Fisher gave when, as the new First Sea Lord in 1904, he was shown a list of 154 ageing warships. The comment was characteristic of "Jacky" Fisher's attitude towards the entire Royal Navy: ships, equipment, training – and hidebound officers. Dismissing his Admiralty enemies as "Fossils" and "Rip van Winkles," – one of them is depicted in a contemporary cartoon (above) – he declared: "Their wives should be widows, their children orphans, their homes a dunghill." Ruthlessly rooting out all who opposed him, he set about re-creating the Navy in his own dynamic image. By the outbreak of war, he had revolutionized Naval training and had given Britain the world's most modern fighting fleet. But he had also made powerful and implacable enemies and in May, 1915, increasingly consumed by megalomania, he made the mistake of resigning once too often. His opponents seized their chance.

By David Howarth

The Spithead Review of 1897 was the apotheosis of the 19th-Century Navy. The occasion, of course, was the Diamond Jubilee of the Queen: seven miles of ships were assembled to celebrate it. No other display in any single place could so directly have symbolized the might and integrity of Empire; for the Royal Navy was the bond that held together all those scattered lands, and its unquestioned mastery at sea was their protection. Ordinary British people may have known little about the Empire: it was too remote to be easily imagined. But the Royal Navy was a visible, splendid and seemingly inextinguishable source of national pride – and with this pride went an affection inherited from at least as far back as Nelson's time.

The Navy reflected this national pride with a pride of its own. It still thought of itself as the Navy of Nelson, or even of Drake, and as incomparably the finest the world had ever seen. Other nations might have minor navies; but to a British officer or rating, it was inconceivable that any foreigner could rival the elegance, precision, confidence and efficiency of British Naval seamanship. This was something only the British could be expected to provide with absolute perfection; or, at least, so the British believed.

And here was the Navy at Spithead, splendid, dignified and stately, prepared to be admired, loved, cheered, painted and photographed: dressed overall, immaculate in appearance and faultless in ceremonial. It was the largest assembly of fighting ships there had ever been, and yet it was only a fraction of British strength at sea. Even on that Jubilee day, the Navy was at its usual posts and on its routine patrols, policing and safeguarding all the oceans of the world.

Yet amid this splendour there was a dangerous flaw that very few people detected. These vessels had never fought a battle. Ninety-two years before, at Trafalgar, their ancestors had so utterly defeated their only possible rivals, the French and Spanish, that sea warfare had practically come to an end. Ever since, the British fleet had been used, not to fight, but to keep the peace.

The fleet had grown to its enormous size because it had the whole world to

As a 14-year-old midshipman, Fisher sailed to China with H.M.S. *Highflyer*. He soon found himself under fire; "I am certain," he wrote, "I am not born to be shot."

Fisher is pictured after his appointment in 1883 as commander of the Navy gunnery school.

Fisher relaxes during a rare off-duty moment in the cabin of H.M.S. *Renown*, his flagship as Commander-in-Chief of the North American and West Indian station from 1897 to 1899. One of the officers who served with him at this time later recalled that when Fisher first came aboard, "the quarter-deck shook, all hands shook with it. The word was quickly passed 'Look out, here comes Jack.'"

police, and because the policy of Britain was to maintain a Navy larger than those of any other two nations put together. But the policy had a fatal weakness. It put too much emphasis on sheer numbers, and too little on fighting power. It tended to keep ships in commission long after they were economical. Besides, the huge fleet had been built at a time when technical skill was advancing very quickly, in ship design, machinery and armament. Many of the ships at Spithead were more or less experimental. Most, if not all, were out-of-date – it had been possible, in the past 40 years, for a ship to be outdated by new inventions before it was launched.

It was one of those moments in history when great traditions and great possessions were an encumbrance. The fact was that if another industrial nation chose to disregard the past and start from scratch to build a smaller, modern, more coherent fleet, British tradition and most of the host of British ships would be powerless against it.

And within a year of the great Review, another nation did make this choice: not one of Britain's ancient rivals, but an upstart which had had no power at sea since the Middle Ages – Germany. In 1898, Germany passed the first of two laws to provide herself with a High Seas Fleet, which could only have been intended to challenge British power.

Perhaps there were civilians who understood such things, and saw the weakness behind the apparent strength of the Royal Navy. But if there were, there was nothing they could do about it: navies have always resented being criticized by landlubbers, and have always shown great skill at making a mystery of their calling – what somebody aptly described, about this time, as "a mystery surrounded by a wall of sea-sickness."

What was needed was somebody inside the Navy who saw its weakness. Luckily, the Navy all through history has been rather good at producing the right man at the right moment, and it did so now. He was Admiral Sir John Arbuthnot (later Lord) Fisher, Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean: a stocky little man in his 60th year, with an ugly, pugnacious and puckish face, known throughout the fleet simply as Jacky Fisher.

In one respect, Fisher was a link with a distant past. He had joined the Navy when he was 13, and had 45 years' continuous service. He had grown up in the sailing Navy. In the Crimean War, he had served in a line-of-battle ship that was almost identical with those of Nelson's time, and he liked to point out that he had been nominated for the Navy by the last survivor of Nelson's captains, Sir William Parker. His first ships had broadside batteries of round-bore cannon that fired a solid ball, not much different from the cannon Drake had used against the Armada. When guns began to evolve from that primitive state, Fisher made himself an expert in them, and in 1863 he was appointed gunnery lieutenant of Britain's first iron-clad, the *Warrior*, a ship that was built of teak and covered with four-inch iron plates. In the early 1870s, he was the first Naval officer to make a practical study of torpedoes. He had seen the whole era of hectic shipbuilding towards the end of the century when Britain was competing in new design with France – the era that had given Britain such a huge and heterogeneous mixture of naval ships.

Jacky Fisher adored the Navy: it had been his whole life. To him, inefficiency in Naval affairs was like sacrilege, and he had a reputation for ruthlessness in weeding it out. Yet, at this age, he must have been a likable man: he had enemies, but plenty of friends and admirers, too. The Navy liked him because he talked a seaman's language, called a spade a spade, and said exactly what he thought without regard for anybody's feelings. He had astonishing energy. It overflowed from an admiral's more obvious duties into a great and sincere regard for the welfare and happiness of seamen. His wrath could make any officer tremble. But ashore at Malta, he founded seamen's clubs, provided canteens and playing fields, and always found time to turn up at soccer matches when his flagship was playing, and encourage or alarm the team with bellows from the touchline. He also, oddly enough, had a life-long passion for dancing. After a hard day's work he often danced all night; and not long before, as a flag captain, he had won a cakewalk competition against all comers on the West Indies Station. But now a much greater prize lay within Fisher's grasp.

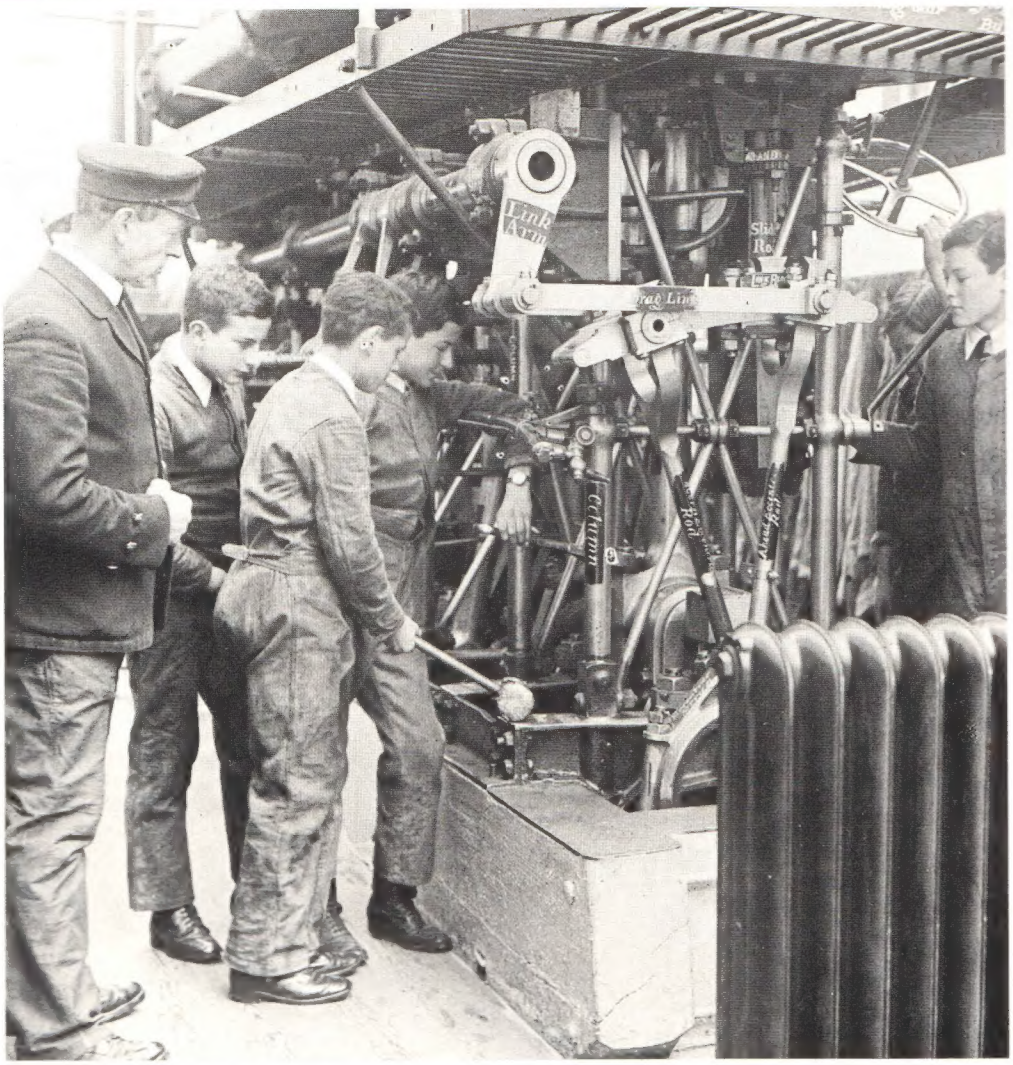
FISHER'S LANDLUBBER SAILORS

Admiral Sir John Fisher was given his first major appointment in 1902 as Second Sea Lord and chief of Navy personnel and training. Immediately, he threw overboard the tradition that had condemned officers and ratings to undergo their basic training afloat in moored wooden hulks. Instead, he brought them ashore. For officer-cadets, he established colleges at Dartmouth and at Osborne, on the Isle of Wight, with an entry age of 12. For seamen, he built well-appointed schools in the dockyard towns.

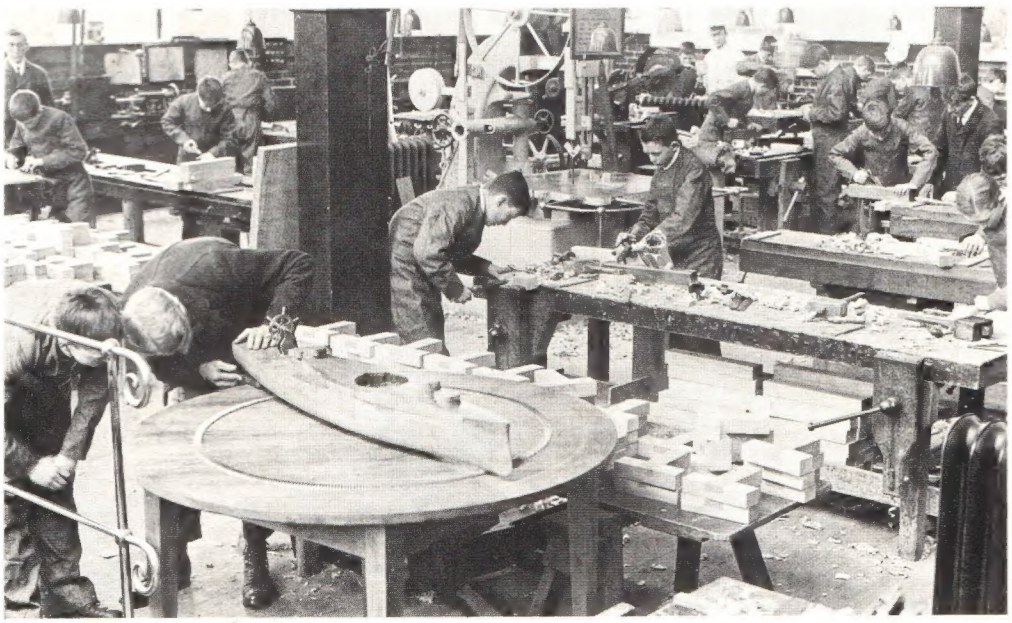
Dartmouth Naval College was founded in 1903 to turn out the kind of officer which Fisher subjects more appropriate to the days of sail were excluded from its training syllabus and

thought essential to a modern navy. Traditional special importance was given to engineering.

A class at Dartmouth receives instruction in signalling. Fisher impatiently demanded "a radical improvement" in signalling technique, with "greater celerity and simplicity."



The study of mechanical matters was vital to Fisher's training scheme, for he was sure that unless officers "stooped to oil their fingers" they were unfit to run a modern navy.



Boys work busily in the pattern-making shop at Osborne in response to the Second Sea Lord's dictum that the hands of officer-cadets need as much training as their brains.

Cadets relax together in the gun-room mess at Dartmouth. Fisher encouraged them to mix as much as possible, believing this would help to promote a socially cohesive, and thus much more effective, body of officers.

New Deal for the Lower Deck

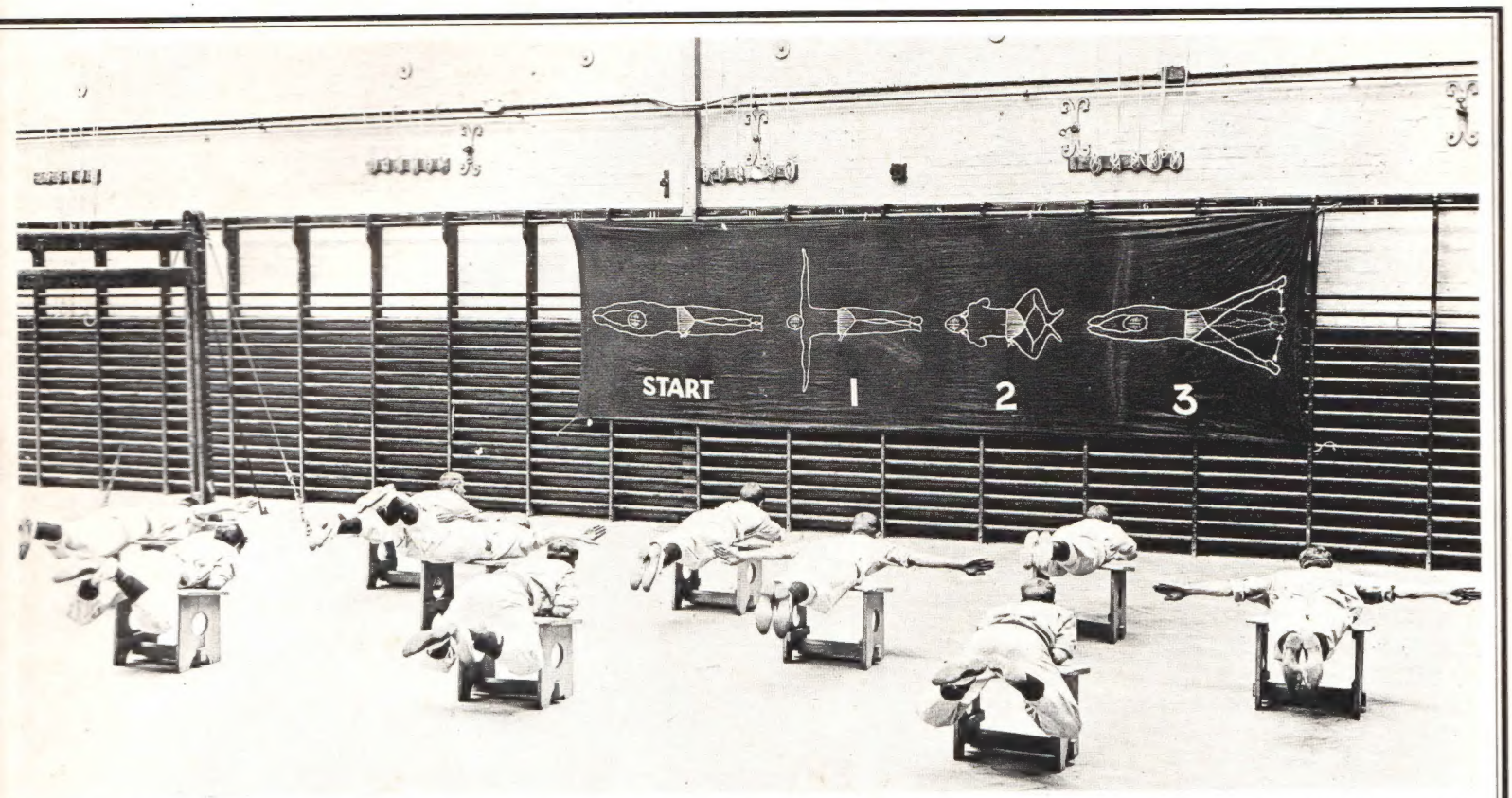
On Trafalgar Day, 1904, John Fisher took on the Navy's top job as First Sea Lord. With the same reforming zeal he had displayed as Second Sea Lord, he welcomed his new role with the typical comment, "I am ready for the fray." Within a year the entire Fleet had been redeployed, all ships that Fisher considered obsolete had been scrapped, and work on *Dreadnought*, Britain's first all-big-gun battleship, was nearing completion.

But Fisher's preoccupation with such exalted affairs did not preclude his continuing concern with the welfare and training of ordinary ratings. He built spacious barracks at Portsmouth, Chatham and Devonport, founded an establishment for boy artificers, and replaced the ancient and insanitary training hulks with new shore-based schools that operated up-to-date curricula.

Fisher also ended much lower-deck discontent by modifying the more brutal aspects of Naval discipline and by improving food, quarters and promotion prospects. Bakeries became a standard installation on all large ships and cutlery was issued for the first time. Foreign postings that had previously separated a man from his family for up to five years were cut to two years. Such solicitousness angered the Navy's die-hards, but below deck Fisher's reforms earned him the affectionate nickname of "Jacky."

Recruits learn to tie bends and hitches on one of Fisher's new shore training stations.

Classroom instruction includes steering and the use of a compass. The First Sea Lord set such great store by these basic sea skills that he founded a school of navigation.



Young ratings practice basic swimming strokes in a gym before venturing into the water. The First Sea Lord considered swimming an essential accomplishment, not only for survival, but as an excellent means of improving health, strength and general alertness.

Young sailors wash their towels. Hygiene was – and still is – an essential part of Naval discipline.

Men of the Royal Naval barracks, Portsmouth, double out from morning prayers. Fisher, who was a deeply religious man, took a keen interest in the style and content of Naval sermons.

II. A Hurricane Hits the Admiralty

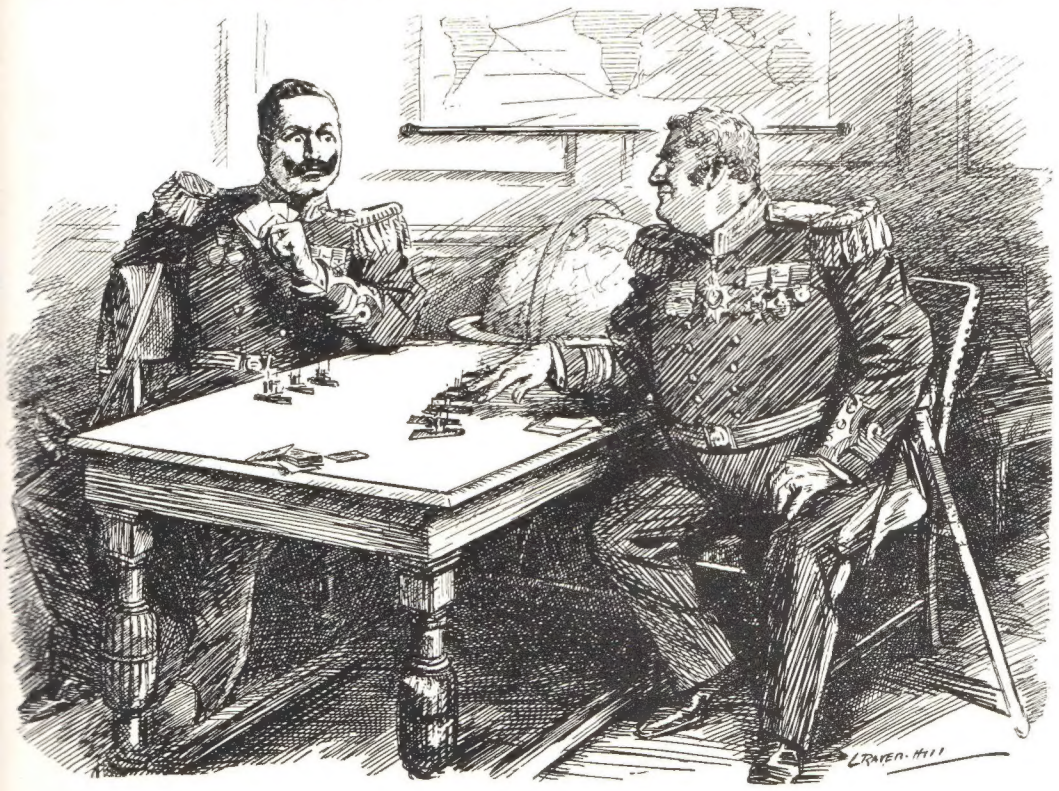
Fisher's had been a long and honourable career. Most men of his age, and with his record of achievement, would have been thinking of retirement. But Fisher felt his life's work had hardly begun. And most men, after so long in a single job, might have begun to lose their ability to criticize it; they might have been forgiven for living in the past. But Fisher was becoming more and more critical, and thinking more and more about the future. Fleet manœuvres under his command were a beautiful and formal exercise of naval precision. But he was wondering what relevance they had to the kind of battle the Navy might have to fight – if ever there were another navy in the world that would dare to fight it.

The customary manœuvres still had some idea behind them of the tactics of Nelson's time, when fleets approached each other very slowly in line ahead, and pounded each other at the shortest possible range. But Fisher was beginning to conceive of a battle at sea which would be utterly different from any that had ever been fought, or even planned, before.

It would be a battle of fast ships and long-range gunnery. The fleets might open fire almost as soon as they were in sight above the horizon, and then it would be a contest of high-speed steaming to bring to bear the greatest firepower. It would be an admiral's battle. At Trafalgar, he pointed out, Nelson had been killed when he was merely pacing his quarter-deck: once he had brought the fleets into contact, there was nothing more for him to do. But in future, fleets would continue to manœuvre throughout a battle under their admirals' orders; each admiral would try to anticipate his enemy's moves and cut them off. Other things being equal, the winner would be the fleet with the cleverest admiral, the fastest ships and the guns of greatest range. Britain certainly did not have the fastest ships or the most powerful guns that science could devise. Privately, Fisher did not think she had many clever admirals either.

All these were revolutionary ideas. Most senior officers were perfectly content with the Navy as it was. It was Nelson's Navy, the biggest and best in the world: why meddle with it? Fisher knew the Navy had always hated changes; he could not make changes just by suggesting them. He would have to wait in the hope of promotion to a position where he could enforce them. So he kept quiet, and only told a few people in confidence what he was thinking. In Malta, he began to make sketches of the kind of ships he thought the Navy ought to have, and he fretted impatiently about the old-fashioned ideas, as he saw them, of officers who were senior even to him. Germany, he believed, was beginning to do what he would have liked to do: create a Navy with a logical structure, free from the wasteful legacy of outdated ships and customs. The Navy needed reform from top to bottom, he said in private – or else (it was one of his favourite phrases) it would be caught with its breeches down.

A *Punch* cartoon of 1908, which shows John Bull playing poker with the Kaiser, symbolizes the race to build Dreadnought battleships. A confident John Bull raises the stake by three.



His first chance came in 1902. He was appointed Second Sea Lord. That office of Admiralty was responsible for the Navy's personnel, including its training. He held the appointment for only just over a year, but in that time he swept away the entire system of training the Navy had relied on for generations. There had always seemed to be some special virtue in keeping cadets and young seamen afloat, even in harbour, and especially in a full-rigged ship. Officer cadets spent one year in old wooden ships moored in Dartmouth, and then one term in a training cruiser. Seamen had similar rather insanitary hulks in Chatham and Portsmouth. Fisher said this was all nonsense. The training was too short, the education was too narrow, and the traditional hulks were only a romantic nuisance.

Most training officers, especially the older ones, were profoundly upset. To them he was rude, brash and vulgar: he called them "Naval Rip van Winkles," or simply "Fossils."

The reports and minutes that began to flow from the Second Sea Lord's office had none of the elegance of traditional Naval style; they were full of slang, mysterious Biblical quotations, exclamation marks and underlinings, and a schoolboy humour that delighted some – particularly Fisher himself – and mortally offended others.

But he did not think much of writing, which he regarded as soulless; he wanted people to hear him shouting, he said, and

H.M.S. *Dreadnought* was Fisher's chief protégé. Cheering crowds filled Portsmouth dockyard for her launching by the King on February 6, 1906.

see him shaking his fist and thumping the table – that was the only way to get them moving.

To anyone who refused to come round to his way of thinking, he was completely ruthless. "Get on or get out" was one of his many mottoes, and officers who got in his way were instantly removed from their posts, sent off to a distant station – usually China – or forced to retire.

By the end of his 14 months, in spite of the opposition, he had scrapped the old training ships. For officers, he established the colleges at Dartmouth and at Osborne, in the Isle of Wight. He increased the years of training from one and a half to four. Three-quarters of it was general education and one-quarter naval, and the age of entry was lowered to 12, which brought it into line with the public schools. For seamen, he built schools ashore in the dockyard towns, and totally changed the syllabus.

It was as if a hurricane had blown through the old-established system, and it left the Navy breathless and apprehensive of what the result would be. But by 1905, the new type of Fisher cadet was going to sea, and nobody could deny he was better qualified than his predecessors.

There was only one thing in the way of training that he tried and failed to do, and that was to improve the standing of engineer officers. Fifty years before, the Navy had stubbornly resisted the coming of steam with its coal-dust and smuts and smell; and the dislike of engines had become a disdain for the officers who ran them. Many executive officers looked down on "engine drivers" as a lower social class. Fisher himself was a snob, but resented this kind of attitude because it stood in the way of greater efficiency. He wanted to educate engineers and upper-deck officers together and make them interchangeable, so that engineering would become a part-time speciality like gunnery or signalling. But in this he was up against a deeper prejudice than he imagined. Executive officers simply would not consider working in an engine room, and engineer officers had no time for navigation or upper-deck work. They continued as classes apart, and to some degree they still are.

After his turn as Second Sea Lord, Fisher had a year as Commander-in-Chief Portsmouth. It was a year of comparative calm for the rest of the Navy. But it was only a calm like the eye of the hurricane before a worse storm from another direction. In 1904 Fisher returned to the Admiralty as First Sea Lord. The First Sea Lord is the senior officer of the Board of Admiralty, subordinate in those days only to the First Lord, who was the civilian political head of the Navy. The position gave Fisher the chance he had longed for – to be as ruthless about the Navy's strategy and ships as he had been about training. He lost no time. "Scrap the lot!" was his best-remembered phrase: he wrote it across a list of 154 ships, including 17 battleships, which he said were simply devices for wasting men. It was shocking: he meant it to be.

It is only in the light of history that the decision seems so obviously right. The battleships had speeds of only 11 or 12 knots when their engines were running well – and they often ran badly. But it was possible by then to build ships of the same tonnage or more and almost twice the speed – and the Germans were making their plans to do it. The guns of these old ships had effective ranges of only 2,000 or 3,000 yards, although modern guns at

the time could fire at more than twice that range. They were ships that were good enough for showing the flag, but they could only be death-traps in the kind of battles Fisher had in mind. They were, as he put it, too weak to fight and too slow to run away.

He had finished with the stage of making sketches. Before he left Portsmouth, his plans were cut and dried, and the moment he came into power he wrote a memorandum: "The new navy, excepting a very few special local vessels, is to be absolutely restricted to four types of vessels, being all that modern fighting necessitates." The four types were battleships of 21 knots, armoured cruisers of 25½ knots, destroyers of 36 knots, and submarines. In this, he was wildly oversimplifying things – perhaps on purpose – to make the memorandum more dramatic. The list immediately had to be extended, to include other smaller ships – coastal destroyers, gunboats, torpedo boats and monitors – not to mention the support ships any navy needed.

To push through this revolution, he had a Committee of Designs appointed, which included officers and respected civilian experts who he already knew would agree with him. The Committee completed the designs he had sketched. First, the battleship. She was to be the first battleship in the world with turbine engines, and a main armament entirely of 12-inch guns, which were the largest that could then be made. Fisher argued that if you could make a 12-inch gun, there was no point in using anything smaller. But there was another, even more logical reason. The only known method of ranging was to fire salvoes from several identical guns and alter the range until some of the shot was seen to be falling short and some over. If the whole armament was the same, the whole of it could then be given the right elevation and instantly brought into action.

The resulting design was the famous *Dreadnought*. The first of the class was laid down in Portsmouth Dockyard on October 2, 1905, and through Fisher's mixture of bullying and persuasion she went to sea for her trials a year and a day from the time she was begun – a record in shipbuilding that has probably never been equalled. She had her teething troubles, like any revolutionary ship: the most alarming was that, when she turned at more than 15 knots, the steering engine was too weak to bring the rudder back amidships, so that she went on in circles until she slowed down. But when these problems were ironed out, she was a triumphant success, faster and far more powerful than any battleship before her. She was also far more reliable. The top speed of Fisher's Mediterranean Fleet had been 14 knots, but it had never maintained this speed for more than a few hours without a crop of mechanical breakdowns. The *Dreadnought*, on her first long voyage, steamed to Trinidad and back at an average speed of 17½ knots without any defects or measurable wear in her turbines. Nowadays, in her photographs, she looks like something out of a museum. But in Edwardian England, when the First World War was looming as a serious threat, she was a masterpiece years ahead of her time.

Fisher's cruisers were equally successful: Dreadnought cruisers, as they came to be called, or later, battle-cruisers. They were faster than any battleship that could possibly be built, but they were armoured and carried a formidable punch – eight 12-inch guns. Their primary task was to reconnoitre an enemy fleet: they were both strong enough to fight and fast enough to run away. And they were also designed to outsteam and outfight the passenger liners that the Germans were known to be fitting with secret guns as commerce raiders.

The *Dreadnought* had plenty of critics. Mostly they relied on an old, illogical argument the Navy had often used against innovations. It was true, they said, that she made all foreign battleships obsolete. But Britain had far more battleships than anyone else, and the *Dreadnought* made them obsolete, too. And what was the use of that? This was the kind of argument that made Fisher very angry indeed. Admirals like that, he said, were a lot of old women who buried their noses in their papers and thought out how wide a man's medal ribbon should be. He began to use new favourite phrases in conversation and letters to describe his opponents: the Yellow Admirals, the Syndicate of Discontent, the Bathchair Harriers. His wit had a wickedly cruel lash to it.

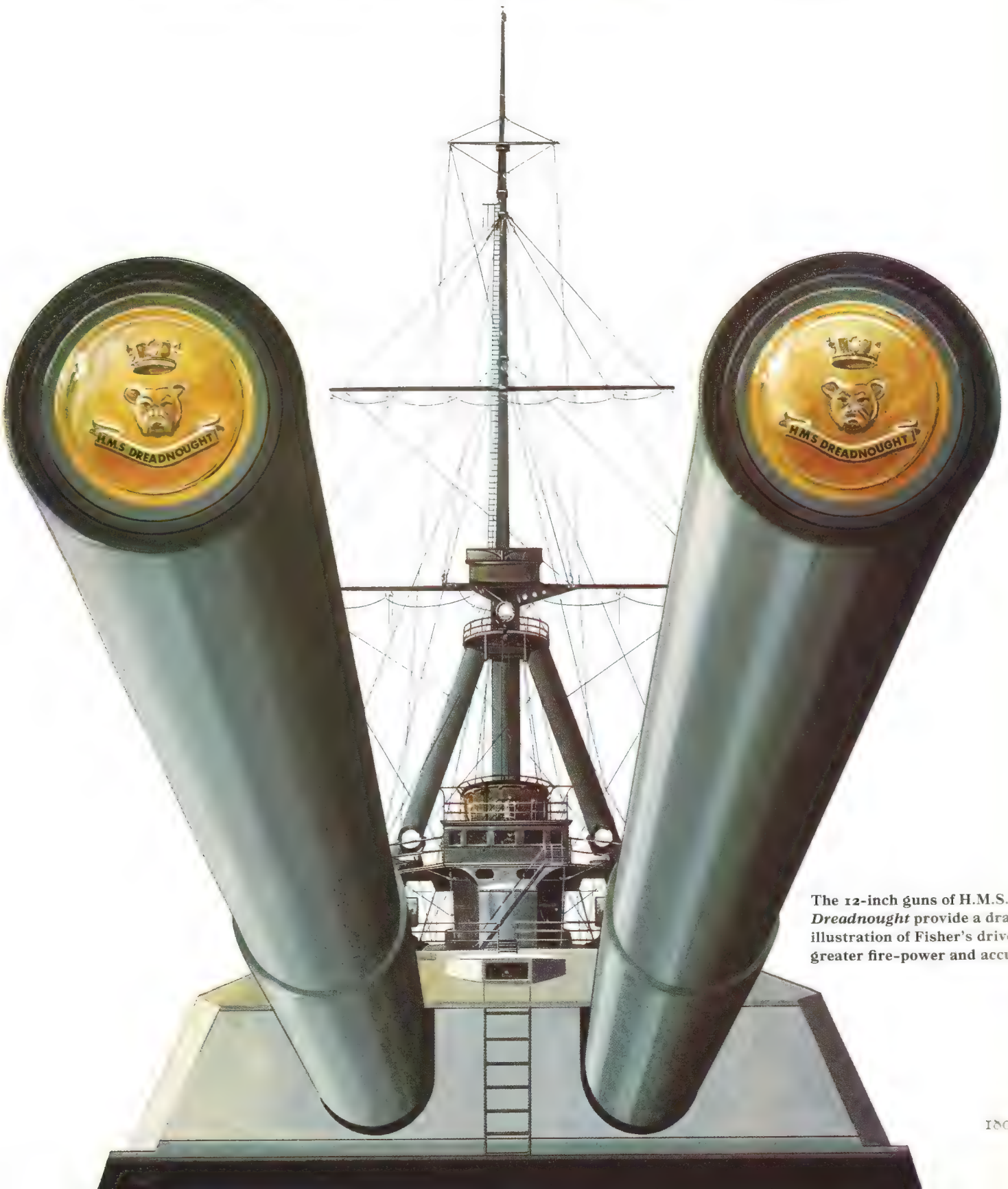
Cruel, rude, pitiless: yet Fisher was usually right. His fourth category of necessary ships – the submarine – was a case in point. Ever since submarines had first been tried in the American War of Independence (they were man-powered then) the Admiralty had been pretending they did not exist and refusing to do anything to develop them. The reasoning was the same as that used by the Yellow Admirals against the *Dreadnought*: if efficient submarines did exist, they would be a menace to the British fleet, so it was better not to encourage them. All through the 19th Century, in fact, they had been looked upon as nothing more than ships which might be used for harbour defence.

But in 1899 the French built a successful ocean-going submarine. Fisher – and the Germans – saw the significance of it: he wrote of "the immense impending revolution which the submarines will effect as offensive weapons." Even before he became First Sea Lord, in 1904, he wrote to the Controller of the Navy, who was responsible for shipbuilding: "I have not disguised my opinion, in season and out of season, as to the essential, immediate, vital, pressing, urgent (I can't think of any more adjectives) necessity for more submarines at once."

By 1908, two years after the first of the Dreadnoughts had run her trials, Britain had seven more of them in commission or building, and a corresponding number of the new cruisers, destroyers and submarines: the speed of shipbuilding in those days was really astonishing. By this time, Fisher was a friend of King Edward (he took a delight in the friendship which was so transparently and unconsciously snobbish that it was quite disarming) and he advised the King that this was the moment to "Copenhagen" the German fleet – to destroy it in its harbours as Nelson had done at Copenhagen. In 1919, after the war, he claimed that if his advice had been taken, the war would never have started and millions of lives would have been saved. Perhaps it was true. But in 1908 the idea was preposterous: for all his far-sightedness in Naval affairs, Fisher was naïve in politics. Britain could not have contemplated a "pre-emptive strike" against a nominally friendly European power. "Fisher," the King replied, "you must be mad!"

THE FIGHTING FLEET

When Fisher made his début at the Admiralty in 1902, he was shocked to find the Royal Navy still floundering in "the bow and arrow epoch." Declaring that unless Naval reform was "ruthless and remorseless . . . we may as well pack up and hand over to Germany," Fisher spent the next eight years building a powerful modern Navy. He encouraged the development of new offensive weapons – the torpedo and the submarine – and succeeded in spite of determined opposition, in creating "the finest fleet that ever sailed."



The 12-inch guns of H.M.S. *Dreadnought* provide a dramati illustration of Fisher's drive for greater fire-power and accuracy

H.M.S. *Alexandra*, launched in 1877, was one of the last broadside ironclads to be built in Britain. Her two 11-inch and ten 10-inch guns were carried centrally below deck, and at 15 knots she was the fastest and most formidable battleship of her day.

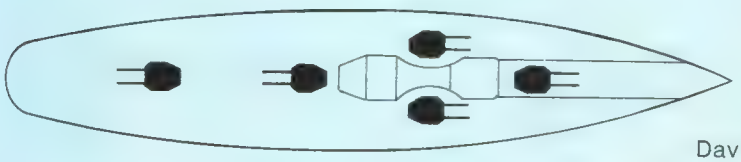
Ships for the Scrapyard

The *Alexandra* and *Repulse*, illustrated below, were the pride of the late Victorian Navy, whose complacent motto, handed down from the time of Nelson, was "two skinny Frenchmen and one Portugee – one jolly Englishman could lick all three." But it was a Navy in which polished brass was more important than readiness for war. Although Fisher himself had been brought up in this tradition, he was not bound by it and did not hesitate to consign obsolete ships – and attitudes – to the scrapyard.

H.M.S. *Repulse*, constructed in 1894, was the first British battleship to carry her main armament of fourteen 13·5-inch guns on the weather deck. She was also the first ship of her size – a record 14,150 tons – to have protective steel armour.

"Dreadnought" Rules the Waves

When *Dreadnought* was launched in February, 1906, she was the largest, fastest, most powerful battleship in the world. Built in a year and a day, she was the first major ship-of-war to be powered by turbine engine. "No greater single step towards efficiency in war was ever made," wrote Fisher's assistant and devoted admirer, Admiral Bacon. Her main battery of ten 12-inch guns, placed to secure maximum fire-power from all angles (below), gave her a great advantage in an era when torpedoes and armour plating made accurate long-range gunnery and heavy shells imperative. Critics accused Fisher of sacrificing secondary armament and protective armour for speed: Fisher replied that speed was a tactical advantage and that "Hitting is the thing, not armour." In that respect, *Dreadnought* put Britain years ahead of other naval powers, but Fisher was not infallible: ships needed to withstand punishment as well as inflict it – a lesson the Navy was to learn at Jutland in 1916.



Searchlight
Aft Funnel
Davit
After Control
Search Lights
12-Pounder Guns
12-Inch Gun Turrets
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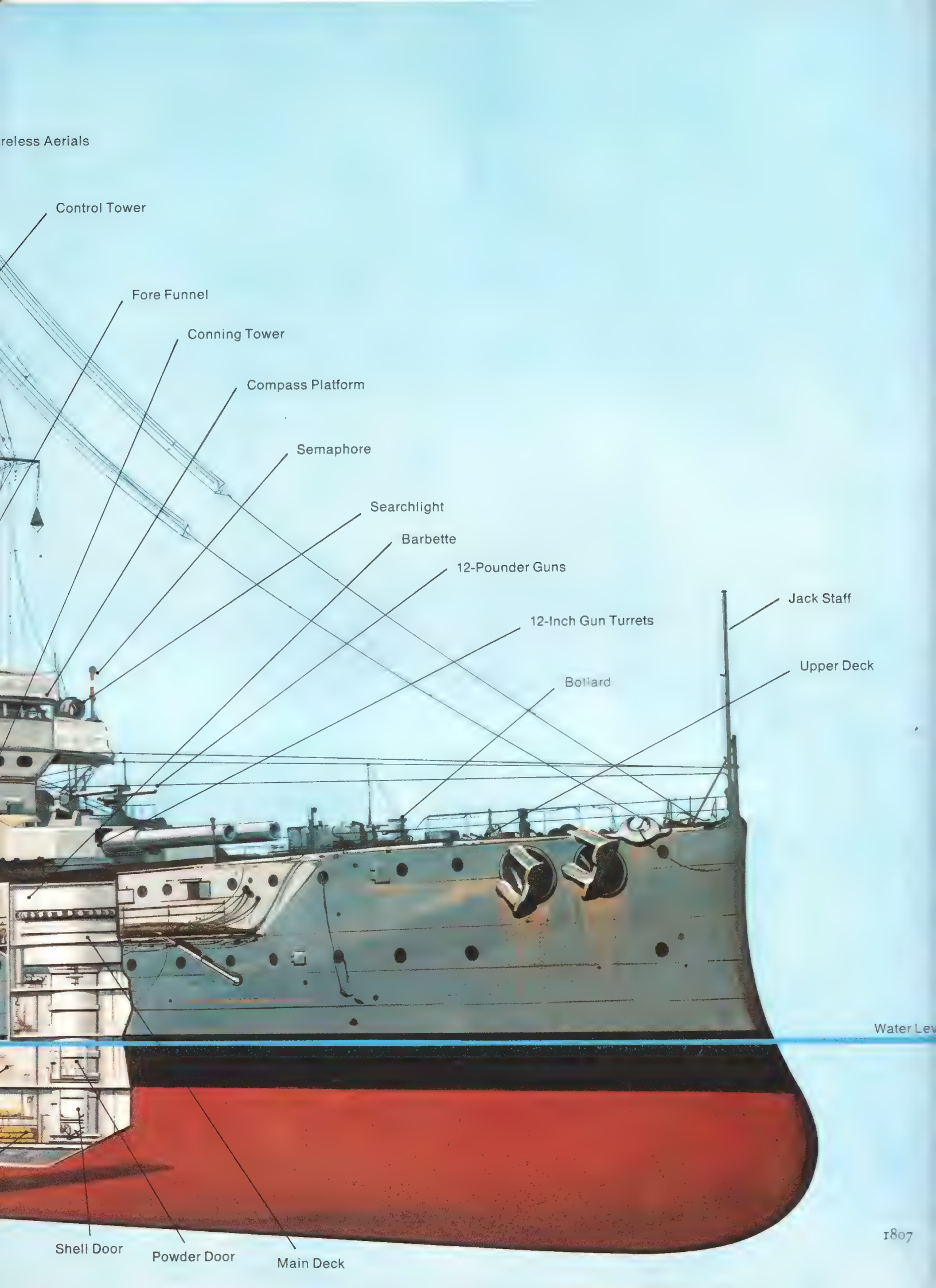
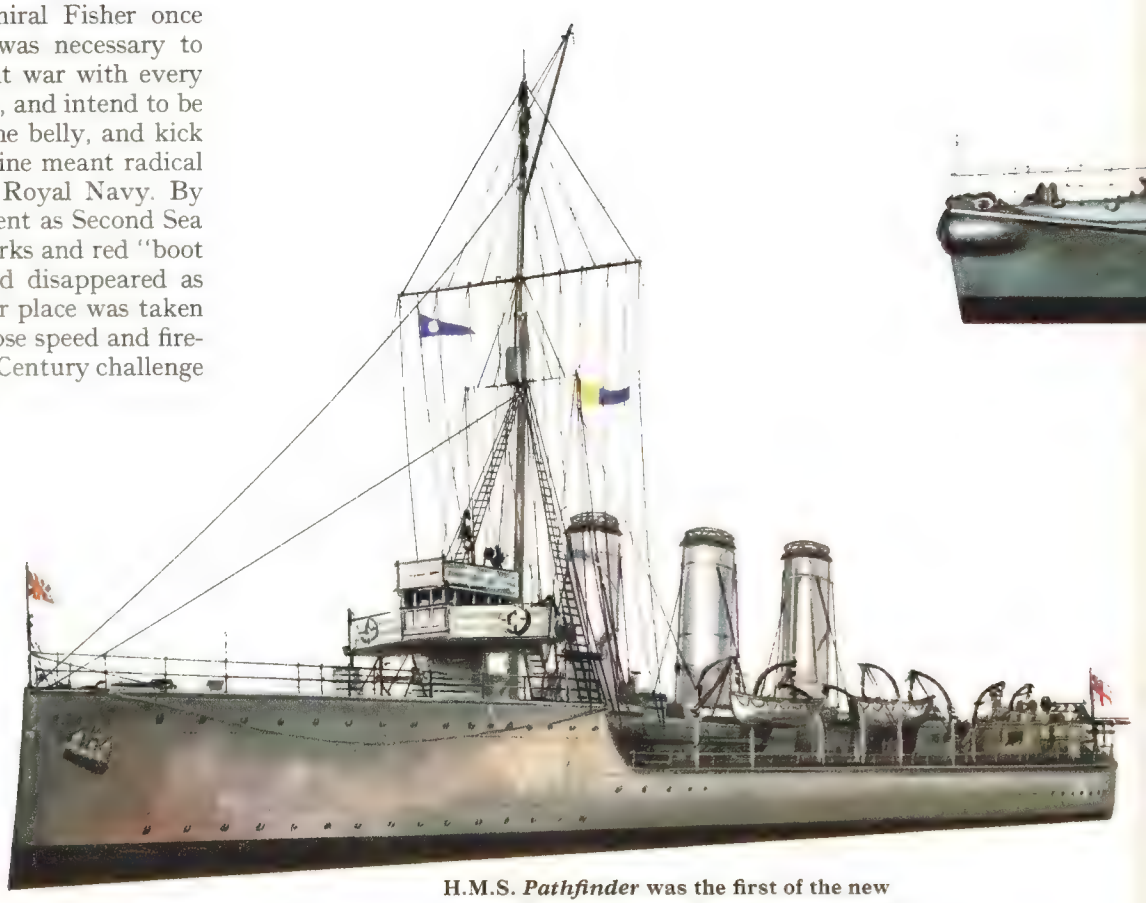
Torpedo Nets
Torpedo Net Booms
Flues
Boilers
Magazine
Shell Room


reless Aerials
Control Tower
Fore Funnel
Conning Tower
Compass Platform
Semaphore
Searchlight
Barbette
12-Pounder Guns
12-Inch Gun Turrets
Jack Staff
Upper Deck
Bollard
Water Lev
Shell Door
Powder Door
Main Deck

1807

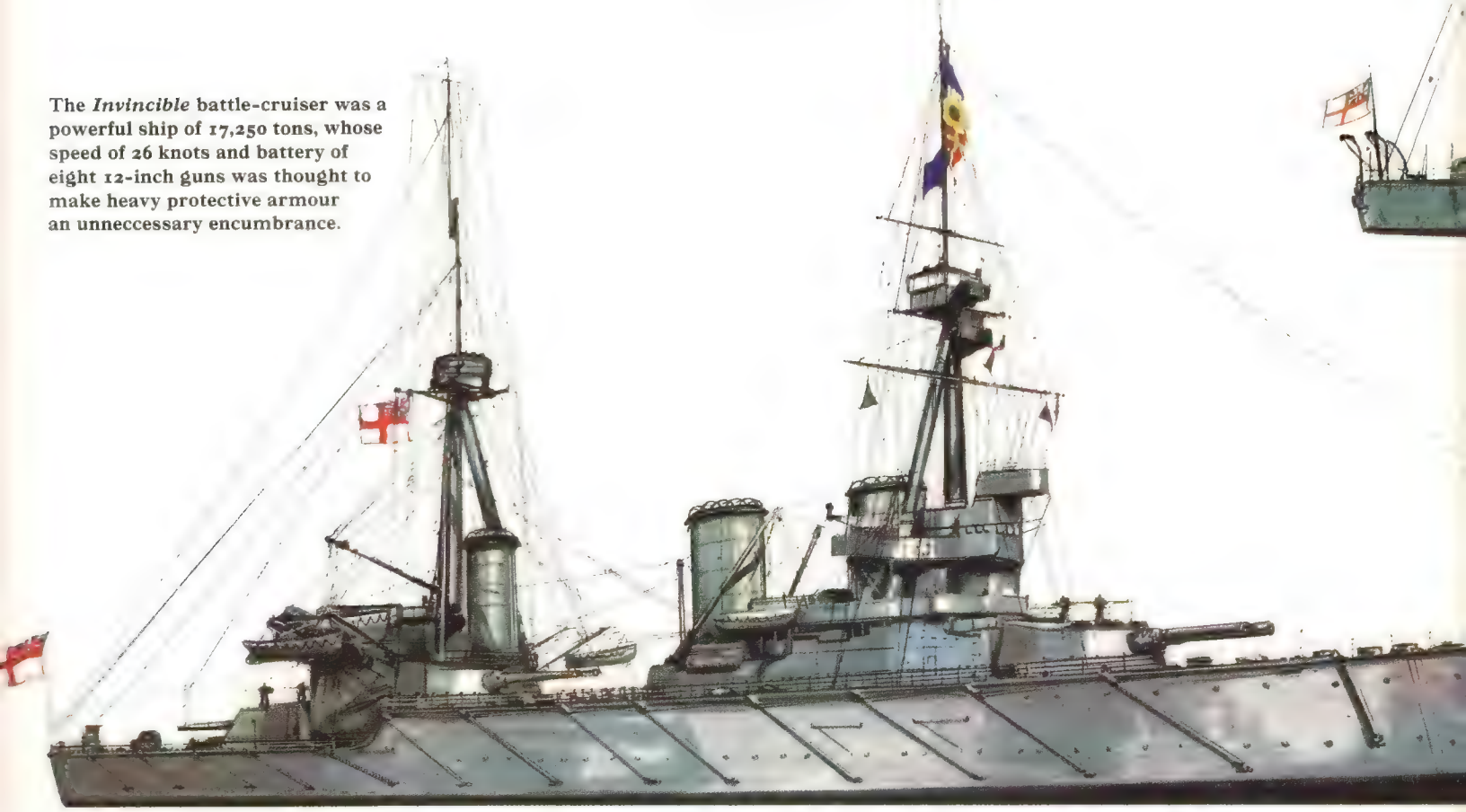
An Integrated Battle Fleet

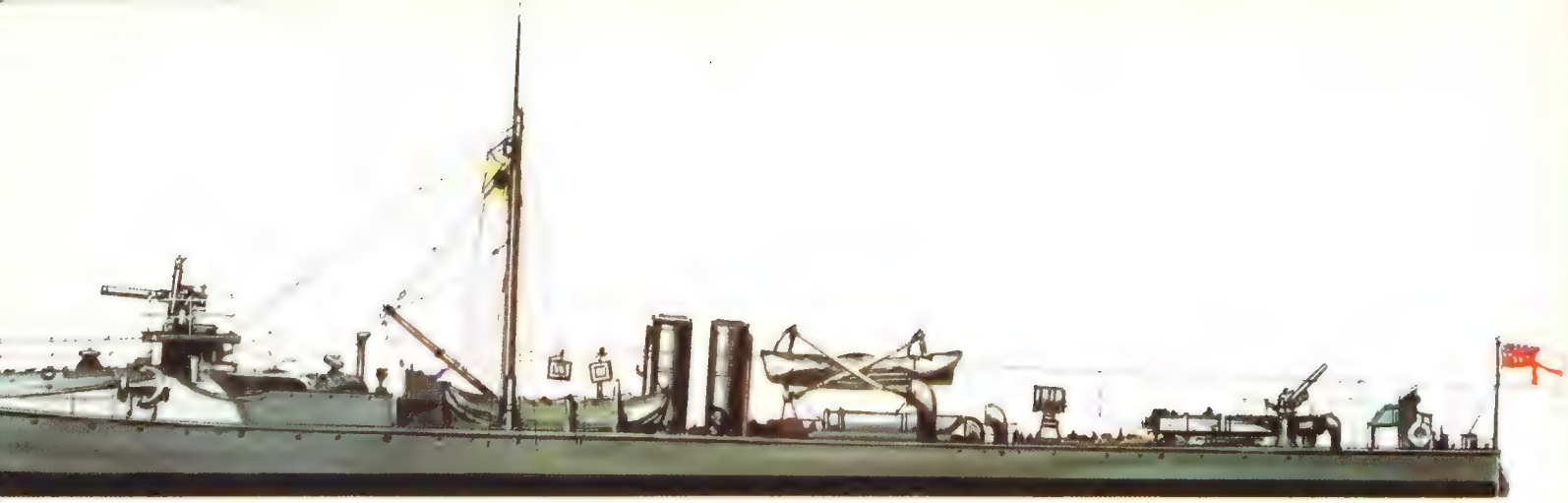
If peace was to be preserved, Admiral Fisher once declared with brutal frankness, it was necessary to show "that you are ready for instant war with every unit of your strength in the front line, and intend to be the first in, and hit your enemy in the belly, and kick him when he is down." Such a doctrine meant radical changes and improvements for the Royal Navy. By 1903, only a year after his appointment as Second Sea Lord, the black hulls, white upperworks and red "boot topping" of the Victorian Navy had disappeared as ineffective ships were scrapped. Their place was taken by sleek new vessels of steel grey whose speed and fire-power was designed to meet the 20th-Century challenge of torpedoes, mines and heavy guns.



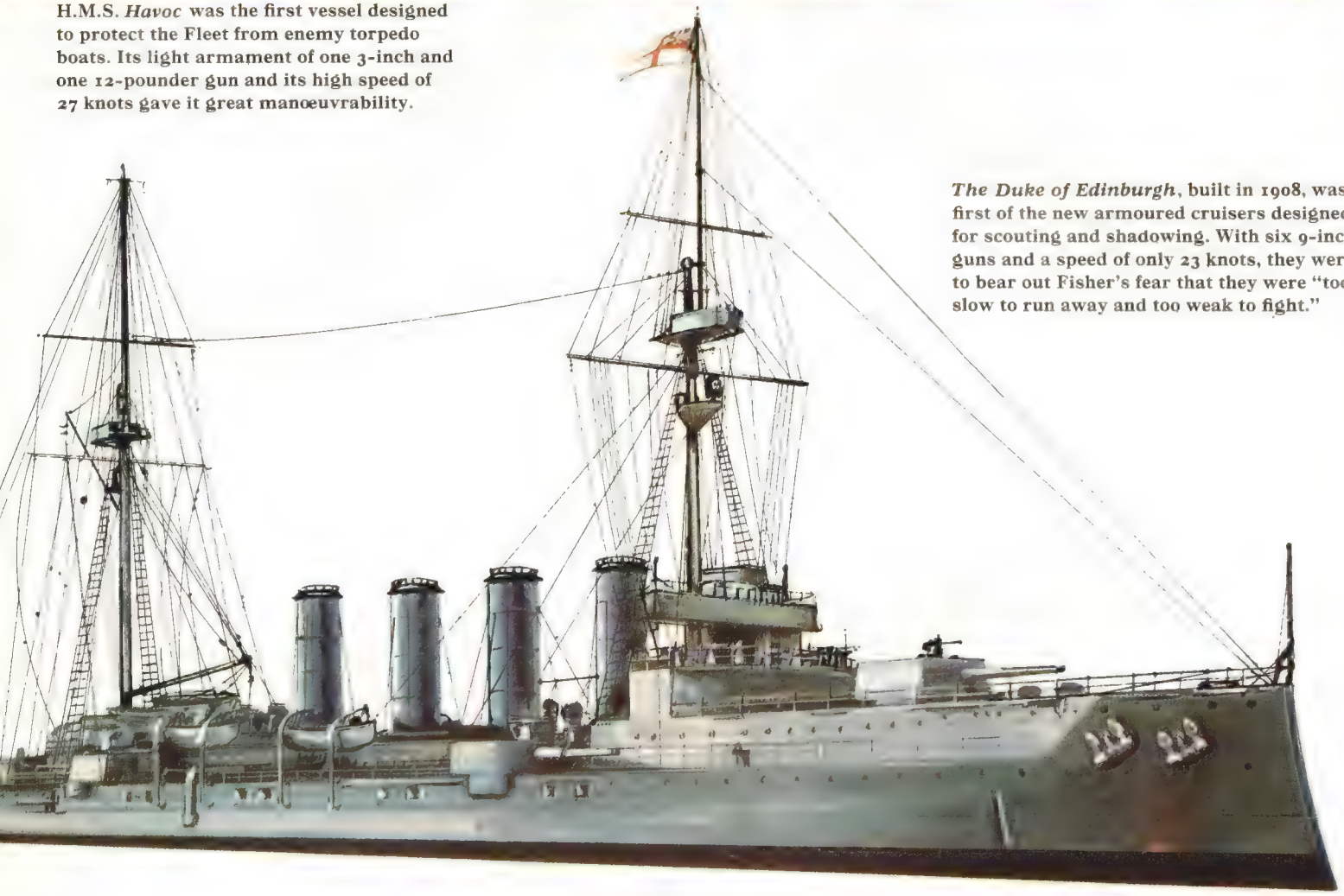
H.M.S. *Pathfinder* was the first of the new "Scout" reconnaissance craft whose task was to "make and maintain contact with the enemy." Armed with ten 12-pounder guns, they depended entirely on their speed – 25 knots – for escape.

The *Invincible* battle-cruiser was a powerful ship of 17,250 tons, whose speed of 26 knots and battery of eight 12-inch guns was thought to make heavy protective armour an unneccessary encumbrance.



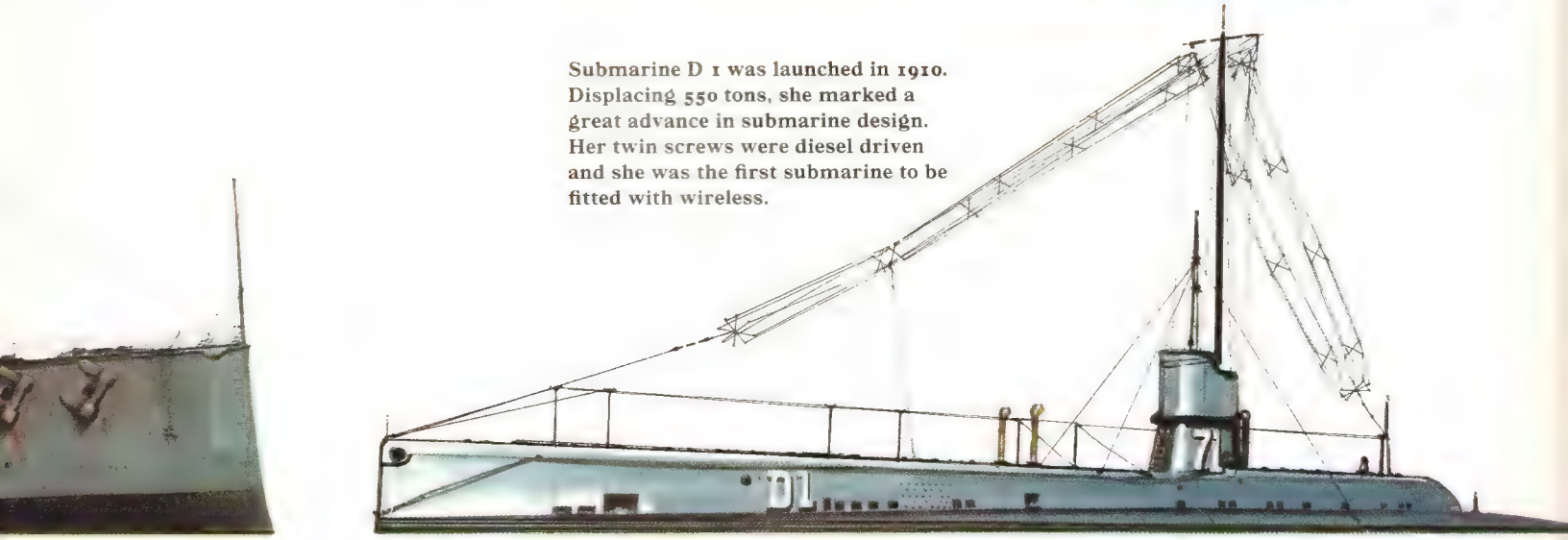


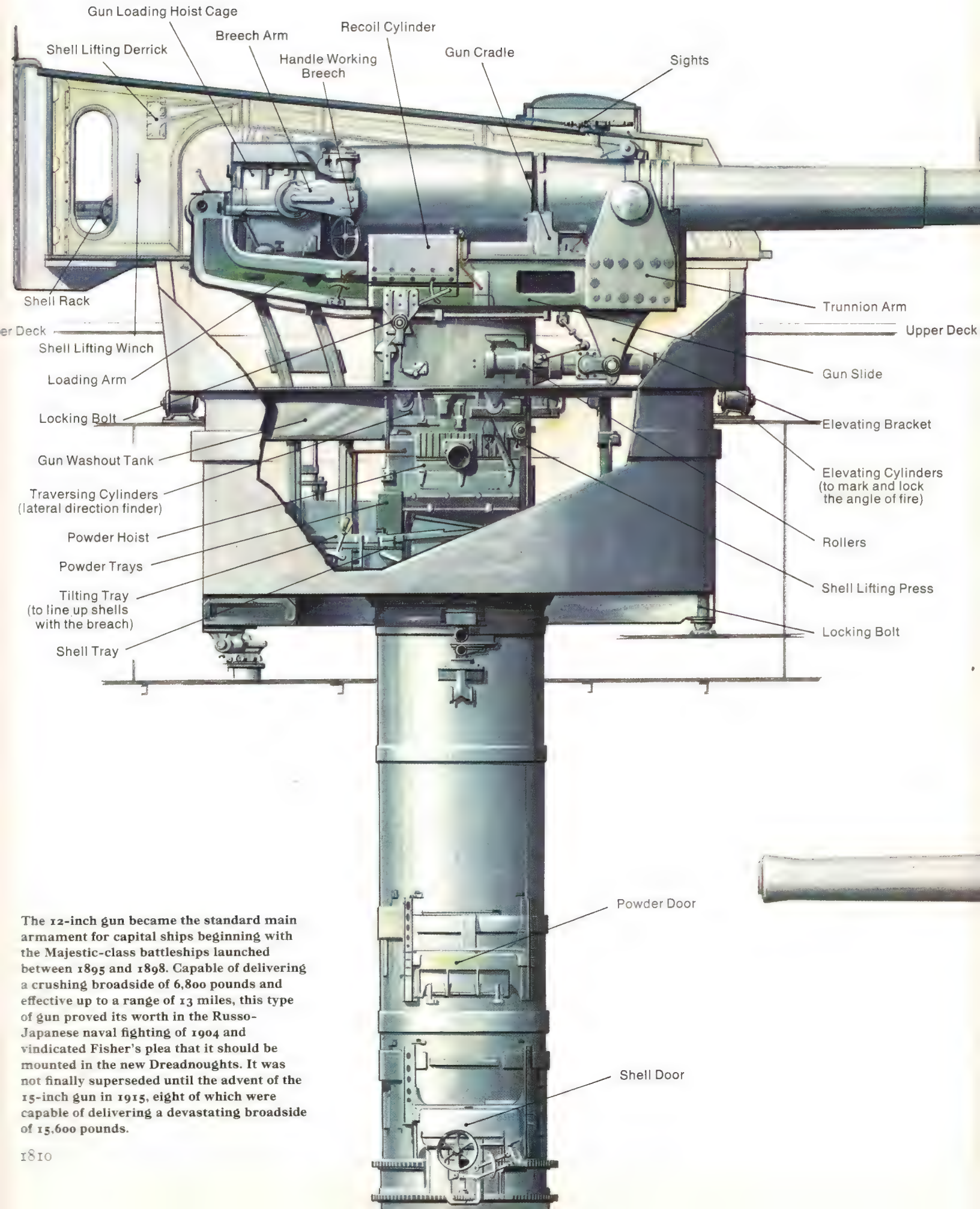
H.M.S. *Havoc* was the first vessel designed to protect the Fleet from enemy torpedo boats. Its light armament of one 3-inch and one 12-pounder gun and its high speed of 27 knots gave it great manœuvrability.



The Duke of Edinburgh, built in 1908, was the first of the new armoured cruisers designed for scouting and shadowing. With six 9-inch guns and a speed of only 23 knots, they were to bear out Fisher's fear that they were "too slow to run away and too weak to fight."

Submarine D 1 was launched in 1910. Displacing 550 tons, she marked a great advance in submarine design. Her twin screws were diesel driven and she was the first submarine to be fitted with wireless.



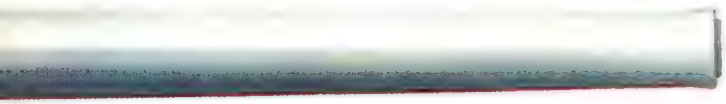


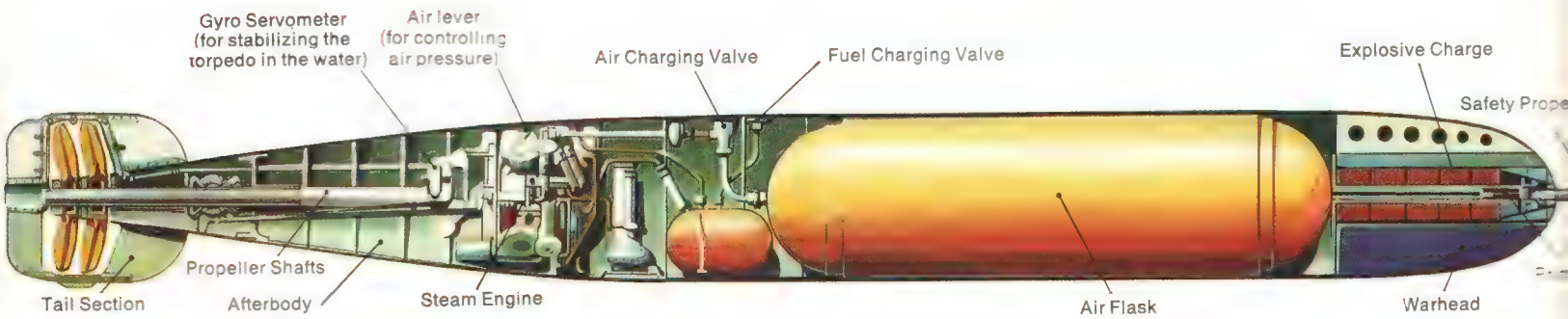
The 12-inch gun became the standard main armament for capital ships beginning with the Majestic-class battleships launched between 1895 and 1898. Capable of delivering a crushing broadside of 6,800 pounds and effective up to a range of 13 miles, this type of gun proved its worth in the Russo-Japanese naval fighting of 1904 and vindicated Fisher's plea that it should be mounted in the new Dreadnoughts. It was not finally superseded until the advent of the 15-inch gun in 1915, eight of which were capable of delivering a devastating broadside of 15,600 pounds.

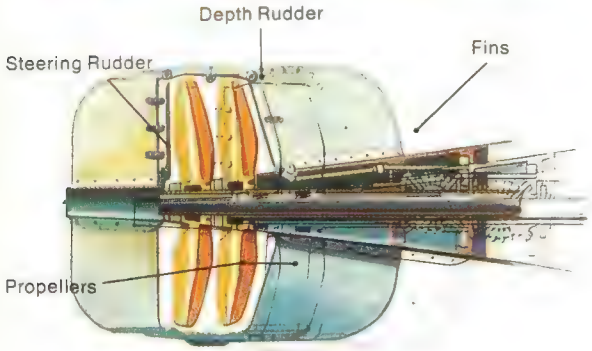
New Teeth for the British Bulldog

"Hit hard! Hit hard!" was Fisher's constant refrain. In 1898, 69 shots out of every hundred fired from ships of the Royal Navy missed their target. Ten years later the number of misses was 21 – an improvement of 250 per cent. Fisher achieved this remarkable feat by insisting on the need for constant gunnery practice, by encouraging the development of new devices for quick loading and accurate sighting, and by ensuring that the Navy had the best weapons available – under the sea as well as on the surface.

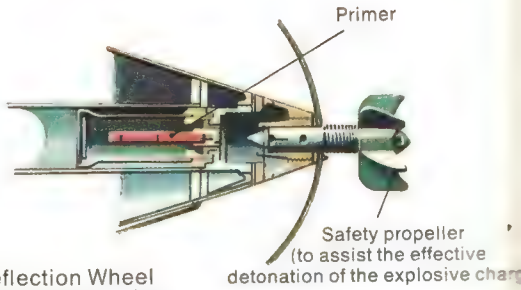
Fisher alone among British admirals appreciated the full destructive potential of the submarine and the torpedo. Many Naval officers agreed with Admiral Wilson that the use of submarine torpedoes was "under-hand, unfair and damned un-English." But Fisher had no use for sentimentality in warfare. The submarine was "the battleship of the future," and Britain had to produce them – and expect the Germans to produce them.

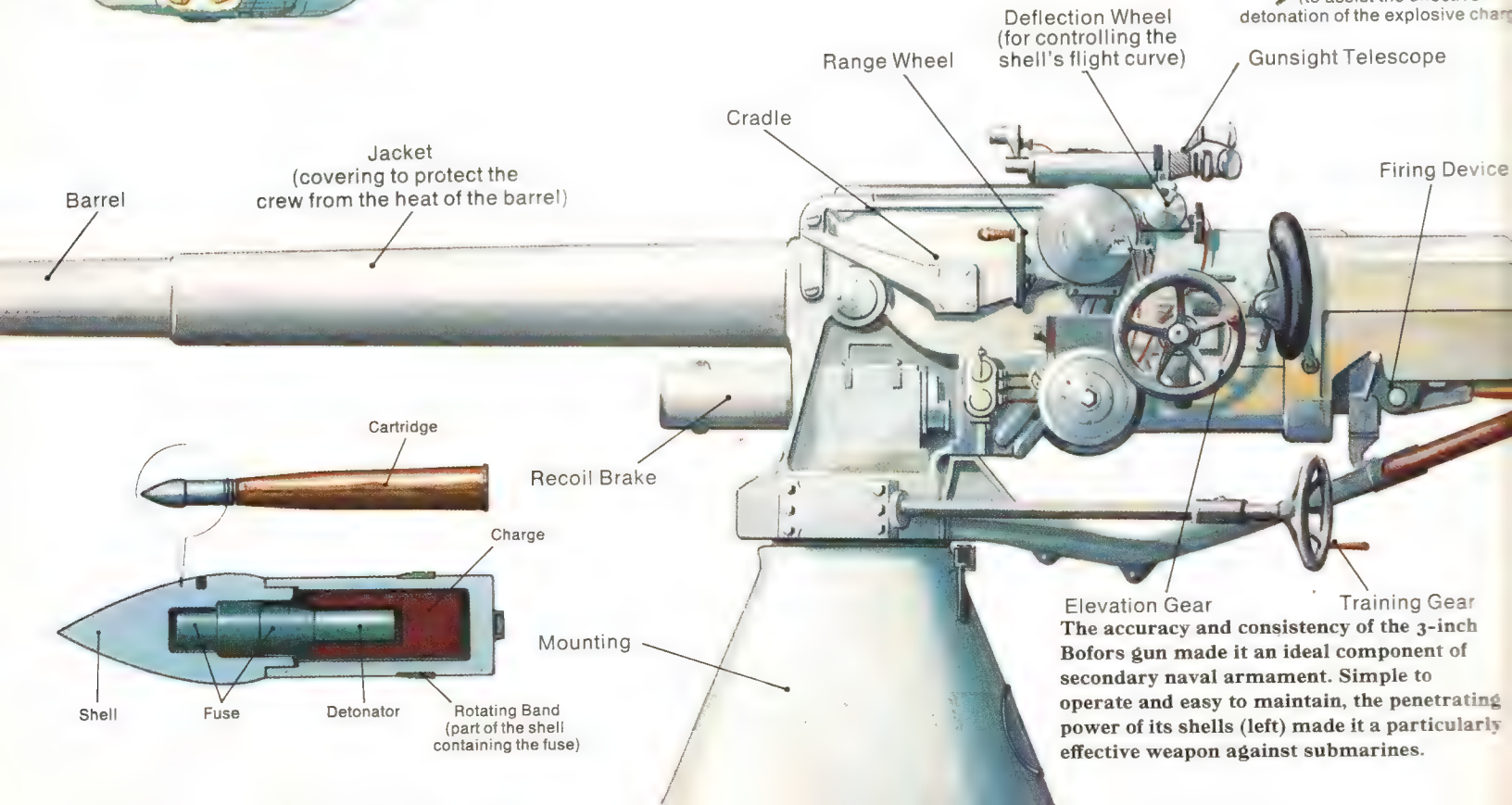






When Fisher became First Sea Lord in 1904, the torpedo had an effective range of not more than 4,500 yards. By the outbreak of war in 1914 this had increased to 11,000 yards. Effective stabilizing gear (left) and greater reliability ensured by the safety propeller (right) added to its deadliness and hastened the development of its stealthy carrier – the submarine.





The accuracy and consistency of the 3-inch Bofors gun made it an ideal component of secondary naval armament. Simple to operate and easy to maintain, the penetrating power of its shells (left) made it a particularly effective weapon against submarines.

"The Perfect Instrument"

The creation of a mighty Home Fleet in constant readiness for war was the result of Fisher's plan "to meet strategical and not sentimental" requirements by bringing ships back from imperial stations. He insisted that, since the only real threat to British Naval supremacy came from Germany, the Royal Navy's main striking force should be concentrated in home waters. Never distinguished for his modesty, Fisher described the plan as "Napoleonic in its audacity."

By 1910, despite outraged Opposition protests that he was imperilling the prestige, influence and security of the Empire, Fisher had assembled the Royal Navy's most modern and powerful warships in home waters (see artist's impression, right, and key, below). To put the Kaiser and his admirals offguard, Fisher invented an ingenious excuse. The newest warships, he claimed, were being dispatched to the Home base at the Nore only because it was impossible for them to manœuvre with the older ships on station elsewhere. By 1914, 88 per cent of the Navy's guns were primed to resist a German sea-borne attack on England and the Home Fleet had been forged, according to one admiral, Roger Keyes, into "the perfect instrument for war."

Bellerophon-class battleships, 1909
1. H.M.S. *Bellerophon*, 18,600 tons
9. H.M.S. *Temeraire*, 18,600 tons
10. H.M.S. *Superb*, 18,600 tons

St. Vincent-class battleships, 1910
2. H.M.S. *Vanguard*, 19,250 tons
3. H.M.S. *Collingwood*, 19,250 tons
4. H.M.S. *St. Vincent*, 19,250 tons

King Edward-class battleships, 1905–6
12. H.M.S *Dominion*, 15,645 tons
13. H.M.S. *Commonwealth*, 16,610 tons
14. H.M.S. *Britannia*, 15,810 tons
15. H.M.S. *Africa*, 15,740 tons
19. H.M.S. *New Zealand*, 15,585 tons
20. H.M.S *Hindustan*, 15,885 tons
21. H.M.S. *Hibernia*, 15,795 tons
22. H.M.S *King Edward VII*, 15,630 tons

Lord Nelson-class battleships, 1907–8
7. H.M.S. *Lord Nelson*, 16,500 tons
8. H.M.S. *Agamemnon*, 16,500 tons

River-class destroyers (E), 1903–9
30. H.M.S. *Cherwell*, 527 tons
31. H.M.S. *Exe*, 527 tons
32. H.M.S. *Ure*, 566 tons

Tribal-class destroyers (F), 1907–9
11. H.M.S. *Afridi*, 865 tons
17. H.M.S. *Cossack*, 970 tons
18 H.M.S. *Viking*, 1,090 tons

C-class submarines, 1906–10
5. C 19, 321 tons
6. C 20, 321 tons

D-class submarines, 1910–12
23. D 1, 595 tons
24. D 2, 604 tons

Warrior-class armoured cruisers, 1907
25. H.M.S. *Warrior*, 13,550 tons
26. H.M.S. *Natal*, 13,550 tons
27. H.M.S. *Cochrane*, 13,550 tons
28. H.M.S. *Achilles*, 13,550 tons

Minotaur-class armoured cruiser, 1908
29 H.M.S. *Shannon*, 16,100 tons

Invincible-class battle-cruisers, 1908
33. H.M.S. *Invincible*, 17,420 tons
34. H.M.S. *Inflexible*, 17,290 tons
35 H.M.S. *Indomitable*, 17,410 tons
16. H.M.S. *Dreadnought*, 1906: 17,900 tons

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III. Meeting the German Menace

When he was not concerning himself with the business of politics the First Sea Lord was still superb and still abrasive. His reforms in the Navy went down to the smallest details. Stores, for example. When a ship came in for a refit, it had always been the custom to land all its stores and when it was recommissioned the new captain had always expected to start afresh with everything new. It was absurdly wasteful. Naval stores were packed with discarded equipment that, although used and perhaps needing minor repairs, still had years of use in it. But nobody wanted the stuff. Fisher put a quick stop to that, and claimed he saved millions of pounds. Nothing was too small for him.

Nothing was too great, either. The whole of Britain's world-wide Naval strategy was changed. All through the century of Pax Britannica, the Navy had been extended in every ocean; no harbour in the world was beyond its reach. The Empire had depended on it. So had minor rulers everywhere who could appeal to the British idea of right and wrong and ask for a British ship, if only a gunboat, to protect them or overawe their enemies. That, Fisher decided, had to stop.

Not even the British fleet could police the world and also be ready at home to meet the German threat. The ships were progressively brought home and scrapped or put in reserve; their crews were retrained and transferred to the new ships coming off the stocks. Oceans that had felt the British presence for generations were left empty. There were plenty of people who saw in this the downfall of the British Empire – and perhaps they were right, in so far as this could be called the beginning of its end. But Fisher insisted the downfall was imminent as well as certain if Britain's Naval strength were not brought home.

The new ships were disposed first and foremost to counter a German move. Hitherto, the Mediterranean Fleet had been the most powerful, with the Channel Fleet coming second. Fisher weakened the Mediterranean and established a new Atlantic Fleet, based at Gibraltar, which could reinforce either of the others. The Home Fleet, based at the Nore, off Sheerness, was a reserve fleet, and many of the new ships were added to that, in the hope that putting them nominally into reserve would not alarm the Germans and stimulate them into speeding up the race. But ships in reserve were now manned by all their specialist officers and ratings, so that they could be brought up to strength and sent to sea, ready for battle, within a matter of days or even hours.

To achieve all this, Fisher was increasingly outspoken, rude and intolerant. More and more officers who would not agree with him became his victims. Perhaps that was the only way it could have been done. But he made so many enemies that the Navy was bitterly divided, which is always a very unhealthy state for a fighting force. And power undoubtedly went to Fisher's head and made him unbearable to work with. He had come to believe he was always right, and almost everyone else was always wrong.

The trouble was that events continued to support this contention. Take the matter of oil. Fisher believed in oil, not coal, as the fuel for warships. But when he said so, his political superior, the First Lord, replied with magnificent ignorance: "The substitution of oil for coal is impossible, because the oil does not exist in this world in sufficient quantities." Furious but undeterred, Fisher insisted on having his way again: oil-fired boilers were fitted first in the smaller ships and then in destroyers and cruisers, soon to be followed by diesel engines; and the more oil the Navy needed, the more it found. But the argument did little to improve relations between the First Sea Lord and the First Lord.

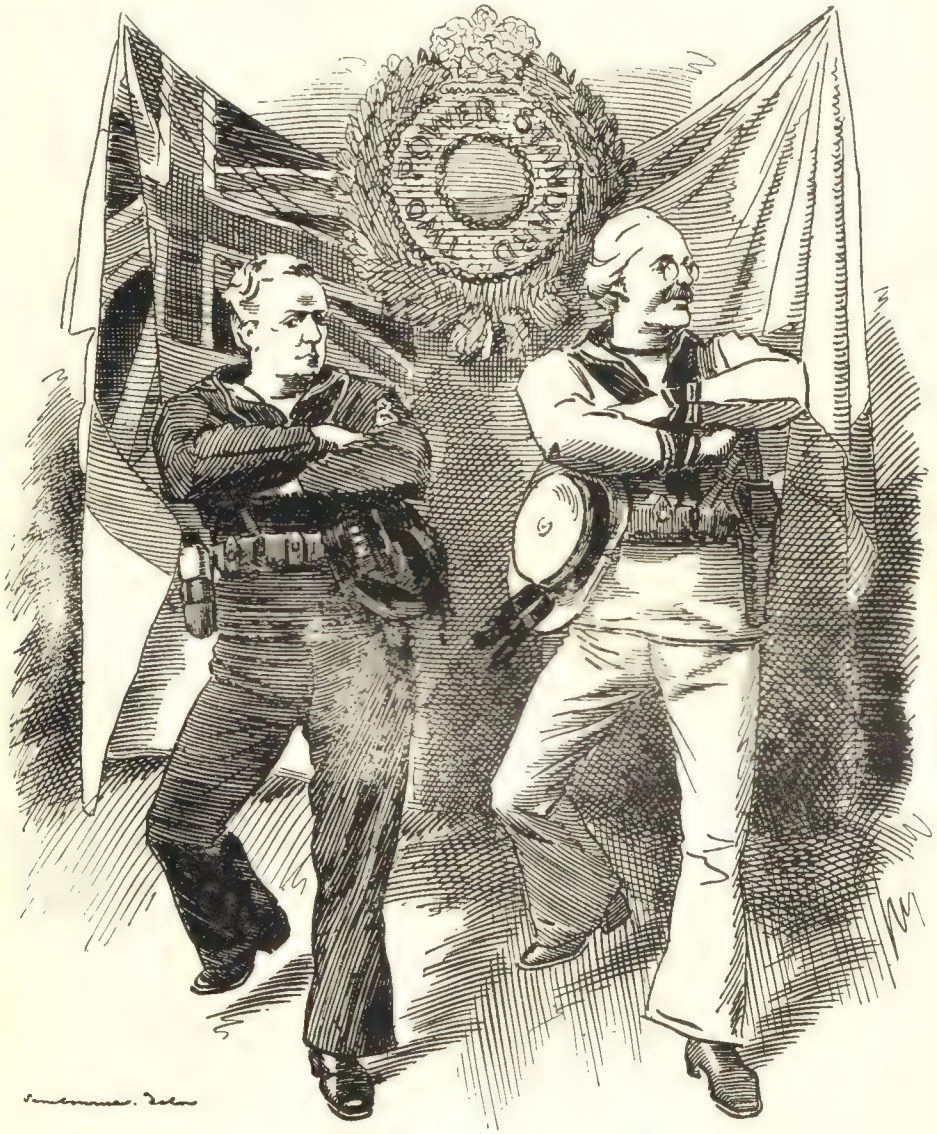
Fisher wanted to be Naval dictator – the word did not have the same significance then that it has acquired since. He developed a dictatorial frame of mind. And that is a thing the British have always found hard to put up with, however efficient the dictator may be. "I'll break any man for the good of the Navy," he had often said in his early days. Now he openly declared that he would break any man who opposed him. The two things meant the same to him, but they sounded very different to other people.

The quarrels he engendered came to a final disastrous climax over a matter of strategy. Admiral Lord Charles Beresford was appointed Commander-in-Chief Channel Fleet, and he took it upon himself to lead the opposition to Fisher. They were two utterly different men. Beresford was a man of charm and social grace, of the type that used to be understood quite clearly as a gentleman. Fisher was not – or, at least, when he was excited he did

The visit by British warships to London in the summer of 1909 helped to allay fears expressed earlier in the year that the Royal Navy was being greatly outpaced by its German rival.

The Two-Power Standard

One of the few orthodox Admiralty doctrines to win Fisher's approval was the one which insisted that Britain's Naval strength must equal that of any other two countries. "The ships we lay down this year," he wrote in 1906, "may have their influence . . . twenty-five years hence, when Germany – or whoever our most likely antagonists may then be – may have the . . . co-operation of another great naval power." But in 1908 a government proposal to cut Naval spending provoked Opposition leader Arthur Balfour into suggesting that Germany could take the lead by 1911. Chancellor Asquith reaffirmed the two-power standard and pledged that "the superiority of Germany which the right honourable gentleman foreshadows would not be an actual fact."



THE DREADNOUGHT BROTHERS.

This *Punch* cartoon of March 18, 1908, which shows Asquith (left) and Balfour dancing to the tune of the two-power standard, followed their clash over Naval spending a week before.

not behave like one. (The King once had to say to him mildly, "Please don't shake your fist in my face.") The Navy has never been an aristocratic institution – certainly it was less so than the Army – but it has always valued good manners, and Fisher, by then, had none.

The difference between these two antagonists is reflected in letters they wrote on the same day, after an interview when Beresford was appointed. Fisher wrote to the First Lord with his usual misplaced humour: "I had three hours with Beresford yesterday, and all is settled, and the Admiralty don't give in one inch to his demands, but I had as a preliminary to agree to three things: I. Lord Charles Beresford is a greater man than Nelson. II. No one knows anything about naval war except Lord Charles Beresford. III. The Admiralty haven't done a single d——d thing right." And Beresford, with more dignity, wrote to Fisher, his superior: "There is not the slightest chance of any friction between me and you; or between me and anyone else. When the friction begins, I am off. If a senior and a junior have a row, the junior is wrong under any conceivable conditions; or discipline could not go on."

Beresford may genuinely have aspired to this professional ideal, but his personal and political differences with the First Sea Lord were too great to be suppressed and his two years with the Channel Fleet were marked by friction. The main factual point of Beresford's criticism was that the Home Fleet was the closest of any to the German ports, and yet was only kept on a reserve basis. He publicly said the Admiralty was wrong: the Home Fleet was a fraud and a danger to the country. Fisher's belief in his own infallible greatness had become by now an obsession verging on insanity, and the Navy could stand him no more. The Yellow Admirals were in revolt: they had pushed Beresford forward as their spokesman, and persuaded him he would make a better First Sea Lord.

Considering the situation and the two personalities involved, it is astonishing that initially Fisher refused to be provoked. He would not tell Beresford privately that the reason was political, that to have a large, active fleet in the North Sea was expected to aggravate

German hostility. People who knew the sort of thing that Beresford was saying could not understand why Fisher did not sack him from his post, as he had sacked so many other men. Nor can one understand today why he did nothing about it. At the time, it gave the impression that there was something to hide, and that Beresford's constant carping had some truth in it.

In 1909, Beresford took his final step by writing to the Prime Minister, Mr. Asquith. During his term as Commander-in-Chief, he said, the fleets in home waters "have not been organized in readiness for war, and they are not organized in readiness for war now today." In all the history of the Royal Navy, no serving officer had made so direct an attack on the Admiralty's policy. With war an imminent threat, the Prime Minister could not neglect the quarrel. He appointed a Cabinet Committee, and the extraordinary event occurred of Naval officers – Beresford and his followers – giving evidence against the Board of Admiralty.

The Committee's report, in the end, swept the whole affair under the carpet as best it could. The Admiralty's plans, it said, had not caused danger to the country, as Beresford alleged. The Board of Admiralty had not taken Beresford sufficiently into its confidence; on the other hand, Beresford had not carried out the instruction of the Board or recognized its supreme authority. But for Fisher, there was a fatal sting in the tail. The Committee said it had been impressed with the differences in opinion on Naval tactics and strategy among officers of high rank, and it looked forward to the development of a Naval War Staff, which could advise the Naval members of the Board and the flag officers and their staffs at sea.

Nothing could have made Fisher more uncontrollably angry. It was an open rebuke of his single-handed rule. There were no two opinions on Naval matters, he believed: there was only his own. He despised the whole idea of a Naval War Staff, which he described in writing as "a very excellent organization for cutting out and arranging foreign newspaper clippings." It could do nothing but "convert splendid sea officers into very indifferent clerks."

But the War Staff had to come: the government had said so. And before it came, Fisher had to go. His years of power had made him so impossibly conceited that he was quite unable to work with that kind of committee. At the age of 69, he disappeared for five years from public life and went to live in Norfolk, rewarded with the customary peerage. "I hear Jacky is growing roses," a naval officer said. "Well, all I know is, those roses will damned well have to grow."

However sad his departure, Fisher had in his stormy years of office succeeded in what he set out to do: to create an entirely new kind of Navy. In June, 1909, there was another review at Spithead. The elegance and precision were still the same, but the ships were different – no longer a mixed, unplanned collection, incapable of fighting together, but the nucleus of a co-ordinated fleet in which each unit was the most modern and powerful science could design. It was a Navy almost ready for the war that was soon to come, and Fisher, with his objectionable methods, had brought it into existence. If he had not been so ruthless, rude and single-minded, Britain would have entered the First World War at a crippling disadvantage, and it is hard to see how she could have avoided defeat.

Soon after Fisher retired, another strong man was appointed First Lord, the political head of the Navy: Winston Churchill. The two of them started a long correspondence on how a navy should be run. It was a strange relationship: Fisher, the old professional Naval expert with a long lifetime's experience, and Churchill, the brilliant amateur, not much over half his age, who knew nothing about the sea. Each of them seems to have thought he

As First Lord of the Admiralty in 1914, Winston Churchill arranged for Fisher's return as First Sea Lord. They were to have three seemingly irreconcilable quarrels but they managed to resolve their differences and became staunch friends and allies.

Admiral Lord Charles Beresford adopts an uncharacteristically stern pose. Although he led the Naval opposition to Fisher, he remained one of the leading wits and practical jokers of his day. Queen Alexandra always referred to him as the "Little Rascal."

could impose his will on the other. From time to time, Churchill asked Fisher to give his advice to the Cabinet, and, after a show of reluctance, the old man agreed. On Fisher's side, the letters were as stormy as those of a thwarted lover: when Churchill agreed with him, he was full of admiration and affection; when Churchill disagreed, Fisher swore he would never speak to him again. All the time, in reality, Fisher was scheming to get back into power, enjoying the flattery of his friends and raging at the stupidity and wickedness of his critics. Churchill wanted him back. But Fisher had offended too many people too often. "He is a truly great man," wrote Admiral of the Fleet Prince Louis of Battenberg shortly before Fisher's retirement, "and almost all his schemes have benefited the Navy. But he has started this pernicious partisanship in the Navy . . . Anyone who in any way opposed J.F. went under." In peacetime there was no longer a place for him.

It was different in war. In 1911, Fisher predicted that war would begin in October, 1914. He was only two months wrong. And in October that year, he was recalled as First Sea Lord to replace Prince Louis of Battenberg, who was a sick man and suffered the disadvantage of a German title. The first two months of the war had not gone well for the Navy. Half a dozen major warships had been lost. In the Mediterranean, through indecisive orders from the Admiralty, two German cruisers had escaped from British pursuit and reached the Black Sea to co-operate with the Turks. In the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian Oceans, German commerce raiders were wreaking havoc. And the day after Fisher's return, the first major battle at sea was fought – and lost. This was the Battle of Coronel, off the coast of Chile. The Dreadnoughts and Dreadnought cruisers were in European waters. In the distant south Pacific, a force of four older cruisers were still in operation. Two of them were sunk by German gunfire at the unprecedented range of seven miles, and the other two had to be ordered to escape. An old battleship, the *Canopus*, failed to join the battle because she had a speed of only 12 knots.

It was all as Fisher had predicted. When news of it reached England, his reaction was exactly what might have been expected. He detached two Dreadnought cruisers from the Home Fleet with orders to steam full speed for the Falkland Islands to intercept the German force if it tried to reach the Atlantic round Cape Horn. Neither of the ships was ready for such a long voyage. He gave them three days. Devonport dockyard signalled that the brick bridges in their boilers had to be rebuilt and could not possibly be ready so soon. He ordered the firebricks and all the bricklayers in the dockyard to be put on board and to finish the job at sea. The Admiral Superintendent came to London to protest, and Fisher merely told him the ships would sail before he got back to his post. And, of course, they did. They reached the Falkland Islands one day ahead of the German force, sank four of its five ships and drove the only survivor back to the Pacific.

Yet Fisher's new term of office was doomed to failure. He was 73, and had started to protest in a rather pathetic manner that he was as strong as ever – he emphasized, for example, that he could still dance all night. But the fact was that his brilliant mind was weakening as his notorious arrogance increased. He still talked too much, and very seldom listened. He was still convinced of his own genius and believed and said he could win the war at a single stroke if only he had a free hand. But the ideas he expressed, and the phrases he used to express them, had become repetitious. People had heard them too many times before. Furthermore, Fisher found it impossible to co-operate with his equally brilliant, enthusiastic and impatient political superior, Winston Churchill. One of them had to go – and it was not to be Churchill.

JUTLAND

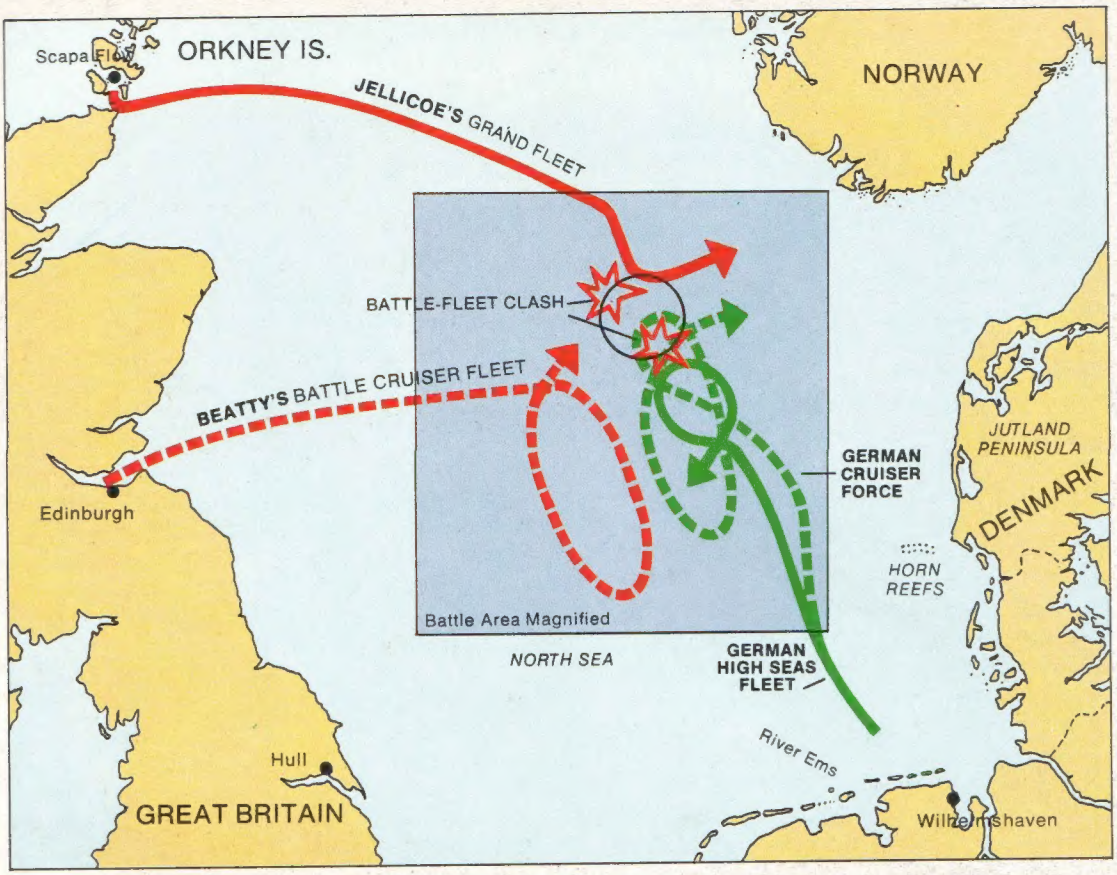
The only full-scale sea battle of the First World War – the occasion for which Fisher had planned – was fought in the North Sea, off the Jutland peninsula of Denmark, in May, 1916. Four main units were involved: under Admiral Scheer there was the German High Seas Fleet and a separate force of battle-cruisers; under Admiral Sir John Jellicoe there was the British Grand Fleet and a separate battle-cruiser squadron.

Admiral Scheer made the first move. Using his cruiser force as a bait, he provoked the British cruisers into attack, keeping them ignorant of the proximity of his waiting High Seas Fleet. But Scheer was equally unaware of the fact that Jellicoe and his Grand Fleet lay only 50 miles north of the British cruisers. Action began at 3.45 p.m. on May 31 when the British cruisers, commanded by Admiral Sir David Beatty, sighted and gave chase to the German cruisers. In the running battle that followed, two of Beatty's ships blew up. But he continued the chase until suddenly confronted by the entire German High Seas Fleet.

Beatty then turned and headed north towards Jellicoe, drawing the Germans after him. At 6 p.m. Jellicoe opened fire on the unsuspecting and greatly outgunned Germans. After skilful manoeuvring by Scheer and fierce fighting between the destroyers, the Germans managed to withdraw.

Both sides claimed victory. Fisher's lightly armoured battle-cruisers had proved vulnerable and the Germans were able to point to Britain's much greater losses in ships and men. But by concentrating on speed and fire-power, Fisher had created a deadly weapon that forced the German fleet to run for permanent cover.

A British destroyer steams towards the raft holding survivors of the wrecked battle-cruiser, *Invincible*. Her bows and stern are clear above the water, but her midship section already lies at the bottom of the sea.


Scapa Flow
ORKNEY IS.
NORWAY
JELLICOE'S GRAND FLEET
BATTLE-FLEET CLASH
BEATTY'S BATTLE CRUISER FLEET
Edinburgh
GERMAN CRUISER FORCE
JUTLAND PENINSULA
DENMARK
HORN REEFS
Battle Area Magnified
NORTH SEA
GERMAN HIGH SEAS FLEET
River Ems
Hull
GREAT BRITAIN
Wilhelmshaven

IV. Fisher's Final Fling

The personal habits of Fisher, the First Sea Lord, and Churchill, the First Lord of the Admiralty, only aggravated the friction between them. Fisher liked to go to bed very early – when he was not dancing – and get up to start work at 4.0 in the morning. Churchill already valued his afternoon sleep, and worked far into the night. When he decided impulsively on some urgent scheme, he would not wait for Fisher to wake up, but often issued orders for ships to sail. That was properly the First Sea Lord's job, and Fisher did not take kindly to having his work done for him. The orders Churchill wrote in his most optimistic moments after dinner would be lying, already executed, on Fisher's desk the next morning in the gloomier light of dawn.

But what they really fell out over was the Dardanelles campaign. In the light of history, it must be admitted that Fisher's view of that disastrous operation was wiser than Churchill's. It began and continued as one of Churchill's pet schemes. Fisher objected to it, not because it was impossible of success, but because it took too many ships away from home waters and, in his opinion, left Britain vulnerable if the German High Seas Fleet came out of port. In particular, it prevented any discussion of his own pet scheme, the masterstroke he believed would win the war. This was to use the Navy to land and support an army on the coast of Belgium, and at the same time to persuade the Russians to land in the southern corner of the Baltic, within 150 miles of Berlin.

This project, said Fisher, meant victory by sea and land. It would simply be history repeating itself: "Frederick the Great," he wrote, "for the only time in his life [on hearing the Russians had landed] was frightened, and sent for poison." Geography had not altered since Frederick's time and Fisher claimed that his scheme was "a decisive act in the decisive theatre of war." But the fleet that was needed for it was "diverted and perverted to the damned Dardanelles." And he filled letters and memoranda with exaggerated phrases to describe opinions that were not the same as his: criminal folly, imbecility, congenital idiocy.

To have one strong-minded individualist at the head of the Navy might always be an asset. To have two was a disaster. In May 1915, after only six months, Fisher wrote to Prime Minister Asquith: "I am unable to remain as his [Churchill's] colleague, and I am leaving at once for Scotland, so as not to be embarrassed, or embarrass you, by any explanations with anyone."

Churchill begged Fisher to stay, but Fisher would not speak to him. The Prime Minister could not allow Fisher to disappear to Scotland and leave the post of First Sea Lord unmanned. But Asquith had to send him an extraordinary letter to keep him in London: "Lord Fisher," it said simply, "In the King's name, I order you to remain at your post." So the old man stayed, in his official house attached to the Admiralty, but he refused to see anyone or to do any work. Asquith believed he "deserved to be shot, and in any other country would have been." And King George V would like to have seen him "hanged at the yardarm for desertion of his post in the face of the enemy."

As it happened, the government was already in difficulties – including the menace of a German submarine blockade – and Fisher's behaviour was one of the last straws. Asquith was forced to form a coalition. When Fisher heard of it, he suddenly saw new hope, and he dashed off a tragically foolish letter. "Dear Prime Minister," it began, "If the following six conditions are agreed to, I can guarantee the successful termination of the war, and the total abolition of the submarine menace." Among the conditions were that Churchill should be removed from the Cabinet, that Arthur Balfour, the former Tory party leader, should not become First Lord, and that he himself should appoint a new Board of Admiralty and have "sole absolute authority" for the war at sea, the appointment of all officers of whatever rank, the building of ships, all dockyard work and the whole of the civil administration of the Navy.

This was the conceit that had finally lost touch with all reality. Nobody dictates to a Prime Minister whom he may include in his Cabinet. And, apart from anything else, it was crazy to think that such powers could be given to a man who was already 74, let alone a man who could write such a megalomaniac letter.

Fisher sincerely believed his terms were reasonable, and that the country would turn to him as its saviour. Three days after submitting his extraordinary demands to the Prime Minister, Fisher received his answer: "Dear Lord Fisher, I am commanded by the King to accept your tendered resignation of the Office of First Sea Lord of the Admiralty. Yours faithfully, H. H. Asquith." There was no expression of friendship or regret, or of thanks for over 60 years of service.

Exactly a year later, in May, 1916, the Battle of Jutland was fought, the only full-scale encounter between the major British and German fleets. It was a somewhat indecisive battle, and there have been arguments about it ever since. But it was exactly the kind of battle that Fisher, almost alone, had foreseen 15 years before – the long-range gunnery and the fast manœuvre. And it was fought by the ships he had conceived. It did not destroy the German fleet, but it drove it back into harbour and kept it there. The High Seas Fleet the Germans had started to plan in 1898 never reached the high seas at all, because it was opposed by the fleet that Fisher planned.

But when Jutland was fought, and when the surrender came, Fisher was pottering about the estates of the Duke of Hamilton, in Scotland, busily reforming them as he had reformed the Navy. And he was writing interminable letters to friends and to *The Times*, more full than ever of capital letters, triple underlinings and exclamation marks. The conduct of the war, he insisted, was effete, apathetic, indecisive, vacillating. He himself still knew how to win it at a single stroke; he was only prevented by the "malignant abuse and emanations of senile dotage" from his enemies. But nobody took any notice any more.

It was a pathetic old age, but perhaps it was not unhappy. He knew some people thought he was mad; but, after all, he said, the Saviour was "voted mad by his family." And Fisher still believed he had always, all his life, been right. "Have I ever failed yet?" he wrote to a friend, not long before he died in 1920. "It's an egotistical question, but I never have!" The fact was that he had, often. Yet without this curious Englishman, England might for ever have lost her freedom.

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